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HORSESHOE HANK, THE MAN OF BIG LUCK; *Or, THE GOLD BRICK OF IDAHO.*

BY CAPTAIN MARK WILTON,

AUTHOR OF "CACTUS JACK," "DON SOMBRERO," "LADY JAGUAR," "THE SCORPION BROTHERS," "CANYON DAVE," ETC., ETC.



"AGAIN!" SAID HORSESHOE HANK, STERNLY. "KEEP IT UP, AND LAY ON WITH ALL YOUR MIGHT! THE UNDERSHIRT IS A WRECK, BUT SO IS HIS CHARACTER."

Horseshoe Hank,

THE MAN OF BIG LUCK;

OR,

The Gold Brick of Idaho.

BY CAPTAIN MARK WILTON,
AUTHOR OF "LIGHTNING BOLT," "IRON-ARMED
ABE," "TEXAS CHICK," "LEOPARD LUKE,"
"BARRANCA BILL," "LONG-HAIRED
MAX," "CACTUS JACK," "BUL-
LET HEAD," "STONEFIST,"
"THE SCORPION BRO-
THERS," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A TERRIBLE DISCOVERY.

"THREE cheers for King Latham!" The man who suggested the act met with hearty sympathy from those he addressed, and the twice-repeated "Hurrah!" rung out with all the vigor six throats and lungs could muster.

They were rough-and-ready fellows, Colorado cowboys, men who knew a good deal about the cattle they attended to, and a good deal more about the use of rifle and revolver, and the art of riding a horse.

Rough as they were, they were also honest men, and their bold eyes were turned with evident satisfaction on the man who was approaching them.

He was not older than some of them, being about twenty-five, but he was better dressed and had an air of conscious, but modest authority.

He was their employer, and his name was Hank Latham. Owning a fair amount of cattle and rapidly gaining in wealth, his men delighted to honor him, to class him as one of the "cattle-kings" of the sturdy young State, and give him the name we have already seen them apply.

Except in one way, he was in every sense one of their own kind—a man who could ride like a Centaur, shoot with wonderful skill, fling a lasso like a Mexican and take care of himself in any difficulty. He differed from them in that he was ambitious and preferred money and power to the wild, reckless, spendthrift life of the average cowboy.

Once, he had been no more, but in July, 1882, we find him owner and master, instead of employee and man.

He made a sort of military gesture as their cheer was so heartily sounded.

"Thank you, boys," he said, smilingly. "You are very kind, but I know that one-half that sound was meant for one I, too, delight to honor."

"Meanin' Mira Garrett," said one of the cowboys. "Right you be, King Latham, an' we're ready ter back it up. I'm Red Jim, an' what I sez goes ez it lays."

"You shall know Mira better when we are married," said Latham. "She is no city-bred belle, and she will be glad to become one of us; she will give the right hand of friendship to you all."

"We was sure on't," Red Jim answered.

"You will be at the wedding?"

"Every man on us, with our best togs on, an' prepared ter shake ther festyve hoof. Bet yer last red we don't miss ther chance ter dance at King Latham's weddin'."

"Good! I shall look for you all. To-morrow, at ten A. M., you know. And how about the cattle?"

"All lovely, Hank. Ev'ry huff is hale an' hearty, an' most any on 'em would answer fur ther fatted calf."

Hank Latham could ask for no more, and in a short time he mounted his horse and rode away. His eyes were bright, for he was going to see his betrothed wife, pretty Mira Garrett, and after that night they would be separated no more.

"I believe I am the happiest man in Colorado. Doing well in business and loved by a charming woman, there is nothing more to desire in the way of blessings. To-morrow Mira becomes my wife, and then I will settle down to that peaceful existence of which I have always dreamed, with a happy home. Home! It is the sweetest word in the English language!"

Thinking thus, he rode on at a brisk trot. He crossed the prairie and rode through a belt of timber. Beyond was a narrower prairie, and beyond that a little range of hills. There he could dimly see a cabin. It was the home of the queen of his heart; the place where Mira Garrett dwelt with her sole relative, an aged uncle.

Latham's face brightened; but as he neared the place he was struck by the air of solitude hovering over the cabin. This disappointed him; he had hoped, and expected, Mira to be watching for him; but he excused it by thinking that she was probably very busy, and rode to the door.

Even then he was not gladdened by a sight of

the face he loved, and something like a frown was on his face as he alighted. He had arrived at precisely the time agreed upon; but his betrothed had failed to be watching.

He rapped at the door.

There was no response.

Twice he repeated the summons, and then an anxious look came to his face. He tried the door. It was not locked. He pushed it open and crossed the threshold.

He was in the little kitchen where the happiest hours of his life had been passed; but it looked dull and cheerless now. Mira was not visible, and the supper fire was not burning.

In one corner a man sat in a chair, his hands clasped before him, his gray head bowed on his breast. It was Jerome Garrett, Mira's uncle; but he did not look up and seemed asleep.

Latham quickly crossed the floor and laid his hand on his shoulder. The gray head was slightly raised, and Garrett's eyes met those of the younger man; but no light of recognition brightened his face.

"Where is Mira?" Latham quickly asked.

"Gone! gone!" muttered Garrett.

The visitor started.

"Gone where?"

"Gone! gone!"

The reply was vague and absent, and even then Latham perceived that the words were not spoken in answer to him. If appearances were correct, his questions had not even been comprehended.

This condition of the elder man, who had been clear-headed in spite of his years, was startling and incomprehensible, and when Hank had tried once more he turned away. He must find Mira.

He called her name, but there was no answer; he looked the house over, but failed to find any trace of her.

Had she gone to summon help for her uncle? He could not believe it, for in that case she would surely have first come to him, as her nearest neighbor.

A chill seemed to fall upon him, and he returned to Garrett. Striving to arouse him, he asked for the girl; but still the dim eyes looked at him vacantly, and he muttered as before:

"Gone! gone!"

What did the words mean? Were they founded on fact, after all? Had harm come to Mira?

All his calmness had by this time vanished, and he looked at the old man almost with hostility. How could the secret be wrested from him?

Just then he chanced to see a sheet of writing-paper lying on the floor, and he hastily picked it up. It was covered with writing, and at first glance he recognized the chirography of the woman he loved.

Hastily, he read what she had written.

"DEAR UNCLE:—This is the last time you will ever hear from your niece, for by the time you have read this I shall be miles away. I shall never return. Perhaps it is ungrateful for me to desert you—nay, I know it is—but to remain is simply impossible. The hour for my marriage to Hank Latham is approaching, but I can not—will not—remain to sell myself to him. I am going to flee with one I love far better than I ever did this plodding cattle-raiser; a man of brilliant qualities and fitted to go through life with me. Explain this to Latham, please, but waste no sentimentality upon him; he has had too much of it already. I hope you will forgive me, and I am not sure my departure will be a loss to you. In any case, you will never see me again; but if you wish me well you may think of me as happy with a noble man whom I devotedly love. I feel that I am fitted for a better and higher life than that of a cattle-raiser's wife. Do not forget me entirely, and remember me as your affectionate MIRA."

The paper fell from Hank Latham's hand as he read the last word, and he staggered back against the wall, pale and dizzy. To him, that note seemed more than the blasting of all his hopes; more than the end of the world; it meant a life more desolate than that of Alexander Selkirk, with the sting of a scorpion in his heart.

"Gone!" he faintly gasped.

"Gone! gone!"

The echo came from the old man, and it showed that he had not spoken wholly at random; it showed what Hank afterward comprehended—that, when Garrett had read the letter his aged nerves and weakened mind had not been able to withstand the pressure. Over his mind was a stupor from which he might never rally.

Latham took two long strides and caught his arm.

"Arouse!" he said, in a terrible voice. "Throw off the spell which is upon you and tell me what you know of this affair. Where is Mira?"

"Gone! gone!" blankly uttered Garrett.

Hank flung the arm impatiently aside. Such a dearth of intelligence at such a time was annoying beyond expression. The young man did not feel like a deserted bridegroom, but like one robbed of all he held dear. Not yet did he feel harshly toward the girl; had he possessed irrefragable proof that she had been abducted he would not have felt a particle different.

What was to be done?

Again he made a search of the small house, looking for evidence, but there seemed none

save that Mira had worn away her best garments. There was no letter for the man who had expected to be a Benedict on the morrow.

He did not know, as yet, when she had gone, but it was sometime within twenty hours. He had left her at ten o'clock the previous evening, at which time she had been as affectionate as he could wish.

What had caused the change?

"There has been foul play somewhere?" he exclaimed, unconsciously speaking aloud. "Some one has bewitched her. She is good and true by nature, and there has been art and villainy used to bring about this result. Who is the man with whom she has fled? By heavens, I will learn his name and hunt him down like the dog he is; his life shall be the forfeit for this deed. I swear it!"

CHAPTER II.

THE FIRST FAINT CLEW.

"SKIP ther sw'arin' and waltz inter biz!"

The words sounded from the door, and Latham wheeled quickly. Unheard by him, a man had entered and stood on the threshold, his tall form drawn erect and his broad hands crossed over the muzzle of a long rifle.

He was a man of middle age, a typical Western character, with a shrewd, honest, good-humored face. He was dressed according to his nature, plainly, roughly; and looked, when coupled with his old-fashioned rifle, like some old-time frontier hunter reproduced for the occasion.

But, if his appearance was ancient, the name under which he chose to be known was truly Western, and Hank, who knew him well, had often heard him pronounce it.

"Dan!" cried Latham, suspiciously. "Why are you here?"

"Oh! I jest waltzed over fur ter see ther folks. Ez you know, I'm a great traveler, an' herewith is ther nimblest pair o' legs you'll find anywhar. I'm Dandelion Dan, ther Dancin' Daisy!"

As we have said, Latham had heard the name before, so it had little interest for him. Something else had.

"Do you know where Mira is?"

"Can't say I do. I gather from ther thread o' yer discourse that she has waltzed off with another feller, an' I can't say I'm surprised."

Latham frowned.

"What do you mean?"

"Why I thought ther galoot in ther brown coat warn't hangin' 'round hyar fur nothin'."

"Who has been hanging around here?"

"Ther man in ther brown coat."

"So you said before, you idiot. But who was he—what was his name?"

Wholly unmoved by the epithet applied to him, the Dancing Daisy calmly answered:

"Now you hev me down. He was a stranger ter me, an' I wouldn't know his face without ther coat ef I see'd him ag'in. All I know is what I tol ye."

It was practically all, though questioning finally developed the fact that Dandelion Dan had twice seen Mira holding an interview with a stranger, half a mile from the house, and that their manner had been rather too affectionate for that of casual acquaintances; while on another occasion the hunter had seen the man lurking near the house, as though endeavoring to see the girl.

Latham was beginning to recover his calmness, for his was a powerful nature, but he still persisted in regarding his successful rival with far more hostility than he did Mira. He could not but see the mean treachery of the latter; he had learned that, though she had secretly been carrying on another love affair, she had talked fairly and lovingly to him the previous night, even when meditating immediate flight; but had she been his sister he would not have regarded her more leniently.

But the man with whom she had fled—

Latham took a somewhat singular course. No words could over-condemn the course of the girl, while her favored lover might have been as much deceived by her as was the deserted one. Yet, toward the unknown, Latham's bitterest hatred was aroused, and he resolved to seek revenge.

"Dan," he said, abruptly, "I want you to help me hunt that man down!"

"Far what object?"

"Revenge!"

"On ther gal?"

"No, no, you fool; on the man."

"Ef it would be jest ez handy ter you, I'd like ye ter address me a leetle more euphoniously, or else skip me when you run off ther keerds—"

"I beg your pardon, Dan; I did not mean what I said. This thing has taken away my senses almost as much as it has those of poor old Garrett."

Hearing his name spoken, the old man raised his head and a faint glow of intelligence crossed his pale face.

"Gone! gone!" he muttered, dismally.

"It has ruined his life!" said Latham, grinding his teeth. "I doubt if he ever recovers his full senses; that letter is likely to prove his death-blow."

Garrett feebly repeated his previous words. His condition was most pitiful, and Hank turned abruptly aside. He had resolved to hunt down the man who had stolen his bride, let the work be ever so difficult, and he resolved to put scruples aside and search the girl's room thoroughly.

Perhaps he could there find a clew.

Leaving Dandelion Dan with Mr. Garrett, he went up-stairs and began his search. It was thorough and protracted, but the result was far from satisfactory. In brief, it consisted of finding in the pocket of Mira's every-day dress a few pieces of paper, evidently the fragments of a letter, and what she had overlooked when the greater part of it had been burned after being torn up.

The fragments did not admit of being placed together, but he could not doubt but they bore upon the present case. They were as follows:

"Stonewall," "flee at once," "my devotion," and two or three smaller fragments which expressed even less.

These told a good deal, but left Latham ignorant of what he most wished to know. Who was the man who had written the note, and to what place had the lovers fled?

Hank fixed his attention upon the word "Stonewall" and felt sure that, if all was known, it would be found connected with either the man or their destination. It might be a part of a *sobriquet*, or of the name of a town.

He went back to Dandelion Dan.

"Do you know a place in Colorado called Stonewall City, or any name like it?"

The hunter shook his head.

"Can't say I do."

"And you have traveled over the greater part of the State?"

"Yas."

Latham was silent for a moment, and then the Dancing Daisy added:

"Hev they gone thar?"

"I don't know."

Hank spoke absently. He was wondering how he was to find the town, if such a one existed. In the East, a postal guide will soon put a man on the track, but there are many Western towns known to but few except their actual dwellers. Stonewall City, if such a place there really was, might be anywhere within the vast territory bounded by the Pacific, the Mississippi, Mexico and British America. It would be hard work to find it.

Latham wandered back to the chamber and renewed his search. Every corner was examined, and so thoroughly that, in a crack in the floor, he finally found another bit of paper like those already in his possession.

It contained but two letters, however.

"—s G—."

This, at first, seemed less satisfactory than the others, but Hank was in a condition when men notice small things, and the fact that the writing on the last slip was in a coarser hand than the others suggested a theory to him.

At least one-half of mankind—and especially that portion under thirty years of age—when addressing a letter, or signing their own name, write more coarsely than in the body of a letter.

Knowing this, Latham arrived at the conclusion that such had been the fact in the present case.

The fragment might be the last letter of the Christian name, and the first of the surname, of the writer; or it might be all that was left of the address—"Miss Garrett. If the latter, it was no clew; if the former, it ought to prove one.

Hank Latham's resolution was irrevocably fixed, however; he was resolved to hunt down the man who had robbed him of his affianced and blasted his future. The event had changed the whole current of his life, and he resolved to sell his worldly possessions for whatever they would bring and leave a place which had grown odious to him.

As Dandelion Dan had seen the man in the brown coat at a distance, he hoped to attach him to the cause, as he might greatly aid in the identification.

At the end of a week, Latham's personal property consisted of the clothing he wore and his weapons. All his herds had been sold, and as he had been reckless as to what they would bring, it was owing to the fact that an anxious purchaser had been found that he obtained a fair price.

Red Jim and the other cowboys were deep in sorrow, for, in their opinion, there was no other man like "King Latham," and it was a great misfortune to lose him.

Old Mr. Garret had not rallied from the shock of Mira's flight, and as he must have starved if left alone, Hank had found a new home for him in an honest family. There he sat by a window and dozed or stared at vacancy, ever and anon muttering his old refrain:

"Gone! gone!"

It was not until the evening before his intended departure that Hank spoke plainly to Dandelion Dan. Then he asked for his company in the search, offering to defray all expenses.

The offer delighted Dan, who would not have

asked for anything more to his taste, though he had some doubts as to whether he would be an agreeable companion to one so gloomy as Hank. His title of the "Dancing Daisy" was not misapplied, and he liked a jolly life. But he decided to go.

"Whar will ye s'arch?" he asked.

"Everywhere," said Latham, curtly.

"Rayther a long job."

"I believe I am good for sixty years of life, in which case I have thirty-five now before me."

"Thunder! you're in 'arnest, ain't you?"

"In earnest? Well, you shall see. To-morrow, a new life begins for me. I have been steady and devoted to business, but the scene now changes. I will plunge into gayety, worthy or otherwise, and whatever harm comes of it shall be laid up against the man who has ruined my life. Exit, King Latham, cattle-raiser; enter Horseshoe Hank, the sport!"

CHAPTER III.

AN ENCOUNTER BY MOONLIGHT.

THE stage from Brown Bar to Stonewall Bend had three passengers. One was a gray-haired gentleman of dignified, yet kindly, appearance, and a general air of one who has always been blessed with money and power.

Of the other two, one seemed a typical miner; a rough-and-ready, uneducated, resolute, yet good-natured, fellow, such as are to be found all through the land of gold.

The third was the most noticeable of the trio. He was a man of about twenty-six years, with a fine form and face; though the latter had a somewhat reckless expression; and his hair fell in waves to his shoulders. His dress was a dashing one, and the man who knew Idaho and its people well would have classed him as a "sport." Yet, he was not flashily clad, and seemed neither a blackleg nor a mere fop.

But the most noticeable thing about him was a yellow horseshoe which was placed at the front of the crown of his hat and fastened to the hat itself. It was not thick enough to be a great weight, but it was certainly of considerable value, as it was of solid gold.

At this ornament the elder man had looked with curiosity several times, but as he was not a man hasty to force himself upon the notice of strangers, it was some time before he made any remark.

Finally he broke the silence.

"Allow me to ask if you are acquainted at Stonewall Bend, sir?" he courteously said.

"Never was there in my life," said the man with the horseshoe, starting slightly.

"I am contemplating the purchase of a mine. Clifton & Gilmore wish to sell, and if we can agree on terms, I shall close the bargain at once."

"Yes," said the sport indifferently.

"Since we are to be companions on the road, I may as well introduce myself; I am named Amos Buckley."

"I am Horseshoe Hank," was the quiet reply.

"That's an odd name."

"Rather."

"Suggested by the ornament on your hat, I suppose."

"The same."

The sport spoke with a curtiness which rather discouraged Buckley from saying more, but the miner came to the front with a remark.

"I am Dandelion Dan, the Dancin' Daisy."

"A name even more peculiar," said the elder man, smiling.

"It fits me like a glove. I kin dance ther boots off'm any other galoot in Idaho. When I waltz, I go so light thar ain't a ripple in ther air."

"Perhaps you are going to open a dancing-school at Stonewall Bend?"

"P'raps I be, but I ain't heerd on't yet. I foller wherever Horseshoe Hank leads, an' his business is ter—"

"To do nothing," said Hank, curtly. "Just at present I am going to sleep."

He had given Dandelion Dan a threatening look, and when he settled back in the corner and closed his eyes, the miner promptly imitated his example.

Buckley looked at them curiously.

"An odd pair, but in the land of gold nothing is too queer to be true. I have sustained a re-buff in my attempt at sociability, but as this Horseshoe Hank is very likely an undesirable acquaintance, it is just as well. On the whole, I am not sure I did wisely to tell him about my business at Stonewall Bend. He may suspect I have money about me, and try to relieve me of it."

And he glanced uneasily at the revolvers in the sport's belt.

But had he known it, Hank had not given a thought to the matter. All his attention was directed to his own affairs. After over a year's search he had found a town in which occurred the word "Stonewall," the same word he had found on one of the fragments of the letter to Mira Garrett.

Would it prove the one for which he sought? He could not tell; but after a year's vain search he was on his way to this place in the mountains of Idaho, as earnest as ever in his quest

for Mira Garrett and the man who had robbed him of his betrothed.

Even to Dandelion Dan he no longer gave outward evidence of his great disappointment. He had entered upon his new life with zeal, and those who knew the dashing sport casually did not suspect he was going all over the West on a fixed mission.

On one point he was a little uncertain. How was he to deal with the unknown man when he found him? He was not one to shoot a fellow-creature in cold blood, but he clung to the hope that when he did find the pair it would be to find Mira so abused that there would be an excuse for carrying on the war with a vengeance.

It was twilight when the stage rolled into Stonewall Bend, and by the time supper was eaten, fully dark. During the meal Horseshoe Hank's mood had changed, and he entertained Buckley with a flow of light conversation, to which Dandelion Dan added with readiness.

The sport had always made it a point to act the part of *hail-fellow-well-met*, when in the mining-towns, and though the possibility that he was near the object of his search weighed upon him, he did not forget his usual part.

After supper, he and Dan sought the bar-room and kept their eyes and ears open. It was Hank's habit to never inquire for those he sought until he had pretty nearly satisfied himself by searching that they were not near. Besides, questioning seemed useless. He did not know the name of his successful rival, and it was likely that of Mira had long since been abandoned.

An hour passed, and then Hank directed Dan to remain in the saloon while he went out to view the place by night. The hour was not yet late, and there was no knowing whom he might meet.

Accordingly, he strolled down through the main street, looking secretly, but sharply, at every one he met. This had become a fixed habit of his, from long search for Mira—a search in which he had never lost his zeal, and but rarely his confidence.

Sooner or later he felt sure he would find the girl. And then? Well, it was a question he often asked himself, but he was as ignorant as any one.

There seemed no better way than to be guided by circumstances.

He was walking slowly, and thus it was that he was passed on the way by a girl who, in passing, looked at him with a keenness of which he could not be ignorant.

He did not secure a good look at her face, but as she moved down the street her movements so recalled Mira that he quickened his pace and kept near her. She did not look around and he soon decided that it was not the girl he sought, but one of those mysterious attractions which, being without an object cannot be analyzed, and he resolved to know more of her.

Very few of her sex were on the street and she won undisguised admiration and attention from the men, but she paid no attention to any of them, ignoring such remarks as were plainly meant for her ears, and soon left the village behind.

Stil, she did not pause nor look around.

Horseshoe Hank hesitated about following further. Why should he follow? He had no known object, and he was gentleman enough to know it was hardly honorable to dog a girl from any slight motive.

She was moving toward the hill which arose at the northwest of the town, and his proper course was to terminate the matter then and there.

He came to a halt and was about turning away when a cry from the girl again directed his attention to her.

One glance showed the cause of her outcry. He saw her struggling in the hands of two men, and as it was likely Stonewall Bend had its rough characters, he knew she was in actual danger.

It was not his way to disregard anything of such a nature, and he bounded toward the trio, drawing his revolvers as he went. Another cry came from the girl.

"Help! help!"

"Curse you!" answered a rough voice, "be silent or—"

The threat was not finished. Unseen by any of them, Horseshoe Hank had reached the spot, and with one blow he knocked the first man over like a ten-pin, and, a moment later, had seized the second and thrust a revolver against his temple.

"Hands up, or off goes your head!" he said, in a voice which could not be mistaken.

There are times when the most desperate fighters see the value of discretion, and the fellow grew as still as a statue in Hank's hands.

"I cave!" he said, quickly. "Keep your finger off the trigger, for there ain't no need o' usin' it!"

The other now gained his feet, however, and with a volley of curses he started for the Horseshoe sport. It was not hard to recognize his intention of making trouble, but he had to deal with one not easily frightened.

"Hold on there, mister!" coolly directed Hank. "I've got the drop on you, as you may

see by looking close, and if you don't keep your distance there will be another drop."

The sharp, clear ring of his voice was not to be disregarded, and he came to a halt.

"Hold on, yourself!" he growled, surlily. "What in blazes do ye mean? What eall have you ter chip in hyar? Git out o' this, or thar'll be a row!"

Hank looked at the girl, who had bravely remained on the field of action.

"Miss," he said, "I don't understand the ins and outs of this case, and if you'll enlighten me it will make my way clearer. Are these men your friends?"

"Mercy, no!" she ejaculated. "Do they act like it? I never saw them before, that I am aware of, but you saw what their way was."

"Precisely. Well, gents, I'm in this game to stay, and as I don't allow any man to ante up in this style when I'm around, I politely invite you to mizzle. Git, or the batteries open fire!"

CHAPTER IV.

HORSESHOE HANK MAKES A NEW ACQUAINTANCE.

"YES," added the girl, quickly, "and you can say to him that sent you that I won't give so good a chance for his work again."

"Nobody sent us," growled the surly ruffian.

"It is false!" she retorted. "Parker Clifton sent you, and I know it well. Tell him all I have said, and as for yourselves, let me tell you I carry a revolver, and it will not be best for you to interfere with me again. Now that I know that war is declared against me I shall be on my guard, and I will shoot the man who molests me."

"Great Cicero, let up on us!" exclaimed the rough. "Won't you give a man a chance ter work in a word edgeways? I tell ye—"

"You need not tell me; I don't want to hear a word. Better take the good advice given you and get out of the way."

"That's according to Hoyle," said Horseshoe Hank, coolly. "Your field of usefulness lies somewhere else. Pack your grip-sack and git!"

The sport had a way of taking the lead which proved irresistible, and though the men were not exactly cowed, they were agreed on one point—it was best for them to take themselves out of danger while they could.

"Wal, ez long ez you won't hear no explanation, we will go," said one, "but I hev one word ter whistle in your ear, young feller. I don't allow no galoot ter tip over my dough-dish, I don't; an' I'll make it hot fur you fur chippin' in whar thar want no call."

"Now, you make me smile," serenely answered Hank. "I never suspected you were the person to fight a man; I had marked you 'W. P.' in big letters, which means 'woman persecutor.'"

"Go it; you'll git tired o' talkin' bime-by."

"I'm tired already, with such a subject as you. Do I see you going?"

"You will right soon, but I wanter say one word ter you. You ain't see'd thar last on me. I'm Gravel Joe, an' them ez knows me kin tell you I never forgive a thing like this. I know you; I see'd ye come in on thar stage, my sport with thar hosseshoe; an' thar's six feet o' ground waitin' fur ye outside thar town. So long!"

With this surly farewell the fellow slouched away, followed by his companion, and Hank was left alone with the girl. He watched to see that no treachery was intended, and then turned his gaze on her.

Her face was turned toward him and even in the moonlight, dim as it was, he could see that she was very pretty.

The experience with Miss Mira Garrett had not soured his nature so much as at one time seemed probable, and he lifted his hat politely.

"I think you are all right now, miss," he observed.

"For which I owe thanks to you," she answered quickly. "Believe me, sir, I am truly grateful. I do not know just what was the intention of those men, but you have saved me, and I know it was from no slight danger."

"You are quite welcome to all I have done. Of course, you will take steps to have them legally punished, to-morrow?"

"No."

"No?"

"I shall do no more than to take better care of myself in the future, and I beg that you will not mention what has occurred to any one."

"Well, I shall, of course, be guided by your wishes, but it goes against the grain. Who is this Parker Clifton you mentioned?"

"Did I mention him?" the girl asked, slowly.

"Yes. You told those fellows that you knew Clifton was at the bottom of the whole business."

"It was a slip of the tongue."

Hank waited for her to say more, but she seemed to have relapsed into deep thought.

"Clifton is your enemy, is he?" the sport continued perseveringly.

"I did not say so, and, with your permission, we will not mention him further. Let me thank you once more and go on my way."

"Back to the village?"

"No, to my home; I live just beyond here."

"Let me see you home. Gravel Joe and his pard may still be lurking near."

She did not object; and they walked on together. As they went he asked further questions and learned that she was without a relative—at least, so far as Stonewall Bend was concerned—but that she occupied a cabin in a gulch, and had a mulatto employee who was devoted to her interests, and able to cope with any one white man in the town.

The cabin was soon reached, and as she did not ask him in, he prepared to leave her at the door.

"I shall be in town for a few days," he said; "and I hope if we chance to meet you will regard me as a friend."

"I certainly shall, for you have proved your bravery; and I feel sure you are also a gentleman."

"Well, I can safely say I never went back on one who trusted me. I make a point of honor on that. By the way, my name is, in Idaho, Horseshoe Hank. If we become better acquainted, there is no reason why I should hesitate to tell you the rest."

"I am Lida Deane. And now, good-night."

She gave her hand frankly, turned, and was gone. Hank felt that he would like to linger longer, but he felt that it would be a poor way to requite her asserted confidence in him to hang around the cabin; so he turned his face the other way and strode back toward the village.

"A decidedly pretty girl, by Jupiter!" he thought. "It sort of makes my old heart, which so dried up when Mira soured on me, start into fresh life. But it strikes me there is a mystery about her nevertheless. It is not the fashion for a pretty young girl to live in such a hermit-like style as hers; while as for her refusal to explain *why* she thought the attack due to one Parker Clifton—Well, that's her business, but I think I'll just learn who Clifton is. A rough-and-ready miner, I suppose, whom she won't marry."

The sport met with no further adventures on his return, nor did he see any one in whom he had an interest, and he was soon in the hotel saloon again.

Desiring information, he selected his man by a survey of faces, and had soon succeeded in warming his social nature by means of a glass of whisky. This done, the man was ready to talk, and Hank learned that Parker Clifton was the senior member of the firm of Clifton & Gilmore, mine-owners.

"Clifton, himself, is a man pooty well on in years; or, at least, his hair and beard are gray; but he still has a clear head and keeps a tight rein on business matters."

"Married man?"

"Widower, with one child; a daughter, named Stella. She is the finest girl in Stonewall Bend."

"What of Clifton?"

"He is one of our foremost men, rich and highly respected. Have you business with him?"

Horseshoe Hank had not sought the interview to be himself interviewed, and as he saw the danger he made prompt efforts to retreat from his position.

This he did without giving his man reason to suspect anything whatever.

"So Clifton is past middle age, rich and respected," thought the sport. "I can't see why he should be Lida Deane's enemy, but her first charge against him was under the impulse of the moment, and is not open to doubt. He is her enemy, though why I don't know. It is none of my business, however, since she was plainly reluctant to confide in me, and I will quietly drop the skein of mystery I have chanced upon. I can't afford to saddle myself with the affairs of another woman. On the contrary, let me devote my attention to Mira."

Just then a hand was laid on his shoulder, and he looked up and saw Dandelion Dan.

"I've got a word ter say," the latter observed.

"Say it then, by all means," was the indolent reply.

"Mira Garrett is in Stonewell Bend!"

The man with the horseshoe started so suddenly that he attracted the attention of those around him.

Cool as he was, and as much as he had hoped from Stonewall Bend, it was no trifling matter to be told that he was near the end of a year's search.

Seeing people looking at him he grew calm, however, and not until all curious glances were withdrawn did he speak again.

"How do you know?" he then asked.

"I had a fust-class chance ter inquire, so I put in an interrogatory. Result, ez I stated."

"Mira Garrett is now in Stonewell Bend?"

"Yas."

Horseshoe Hank's face became dark and scowling. If she was living there under her maiden name, his fears in regard to her hasty movement seemed only too well founded.

"Who else is here?" he asked, in a voice which practically closed the door on a light reply.

"Wal, they sez ez how she lives in a cabin, alone."

The sport's expression again changed.

"Deserted and heart-broken, I suppose."

"I thought o' thet an' inquired, but they sez she is ez pert an' chipper ez a bird. Guess she ain't heart-broke."

"Then she is not deserted. Bah! why did I think of it? The fact that she is here proves pretty surely that my conjecture as to the fragment of the letter was correct. It was to Stonewall Bend, Idaho, the runaways were to go, and here we have hived them. To-morrow, we will look further, and then I'll know who is the man who robbed me of a wife!"

Dandelion Dan looked with a little awe at the pale, set face before him.

"And what then?" he slowly asked.

"Then—" Hank impulsively began, but as suddenly paused; and his voice was calm and even, but ominous, as he added: "Then I will have my revenge!"

CHAPTER V.

THE "GOLDEN BRICK" CHANGES HANDS.

THE following morning two young men were standing together on the main street of Stonewall Bend. Happily, they were not handsome men, but they were rugged, intelligent, well-dressed young fellows, who had plainly cultivated the brains Nature had given them until, at twenty-five, they were fitted both for society and for battling the world.

Both were calculated to create a favorable opinion with those they met, and the young Idaho town was proud of them.

Conversation had ceased between them, but one of the pair suddenly raised his gaze to his companion's face.

"So it is settled?" he questioned.

The other started, as though aroused from deep thought.

"To what do you refer, Francis?" he asked.

"To the sale of the Golden Brick, of course."

"Oh! Yes, it is settled; all except drawing up the papers. Amos Buckley has returned prepared to take the mine, and has brought the twenty thousand dollars he is to pay for it. This evening we meet at the office and draw up the papers: Mr. Clifton and I take the money and the Golden Brick passes forever out of our hands."

Ross Gilmore sighed as he spoke.

"You don't seem pleased," observed Francis, looking at him keenly. "I hope the sale will not affect your prospects with Stella?"

"Thank Heaven, no! I am sure of her, in any case. Yet, I will confess I am not pleased at the thought of leaving here. I have reasons for wishing to remain—Well, I won't try to explain, for, at the very least, you would think me foolish. Let it drop. It is settled that Clifton & Gilmore sell their mine and go to Denver. All this is by the wish of my partner and I have yielded."

"Against your wishes?"

"Well, yes."

"I would not do that, Ross."

"Mr. Clifton has made me what I am, and when I marry his daughter the tie will be even closer; I cannot afford to anger him."

"I suspect the nature of that which inclines you to remain at Stonewall Bend."

"Don't mention it, Francis," said Gilmore, hastily. "You are my best friend, and as such should be charitable as to my weakness. I have one, I confess, but when I leave the Bend I bury it leagues under ground, nor will it ever be resurrected."

"Don't be so sure of that. People say that murder and love never die, and—"

The remainder of the remark was never made. Just then a third party appeared on the scene and the conversation gave place to one of an entirely different character.

When that, in turn, ended, Ross Gilmore went on alone and soon entered the office of the firm of which he was the junior member.

Clifton and Gilmore ranked high among the noted men of Stonewall Bend. They had done a fair business in the Golden Brick mine—their profits had been equal to those of the other mine-owners—and poorer men were always ready to speak in their behalf. They considered them not only great men, but men of honor and heart.

The senior partner, however, had taken a fancy to go to Denver and try his luck at something else, and as a purchaser had been found in the person of Amos Buckley, the Golden Brick was about to change hands.

Ross Gilmore entered the office as though he was going to a funeral. He was a man to become attached to places and things through long association, and this, together with another reason he did not care to have known, made him feel gloomy at the thought that it was his last day in the old office.

He sat down and stared blankly at the wall for a long time, but there was work which required his attention and he finally aroused with a start.

"I am a fool!" he muttered. "Why don't I turn my back forever on what my common sense tells me is folly? Perhaps it is the best thing I can do to leave here forever. Once in Denver I will give all my attention to Stella and forget this other passion. I feel guilty—and weak!"

He caught up a duster and began cleaning the office with energy, striving to forget what was on his mind, but the welfare of our story requires us to say he did not wholly succeed.

It had been arranged that the transfer of the Golden Brick should take place in the office of Clifton & Gilmore, at half-past six, in the afternoon, and at that hour Mr. Amos Buckley repaired to the place with his twenty thousand dollars ready for the payment.

Since his arrival on the stage the previous evening, as before mentioned, he had employed his time in looking the town over thoroughly. He had previously seen all that was necessary of the mine.

He brought with him to the office a gentleman known as "Lawyer Jones," though said gentleman had abandoned the practice of law five years before, when he came to Idaho, and had since been a merchant.

Stonewall Bend lacked lawyers, courts and officers of all kinds, but Lawyer Jones was in the habit of doing what business of the kind was necessary, and he was now needed to draw up the deed.

On entering the office Buckley perceived that Gilmore and Ruford, the clerk, were the only occupants of the place.

"Where is Mr. Clifton?" he asked, after the preliminary greetings were over.

"He met with a fall at the mine to-day," answered Gilmore, "and will not be able to come here. He has a severe sprain of one knee and is in great pain, so much so that he cannot even receive visitors."

"Then the sale must be postponed," said Buckley, with a look of disappointment.

"No. To meet this emergency, Mr. Ruford has drawn up a deed, to which Mr. Clifton's name is already appended. It only needs mine to make it complete."

"Perhaps it is not correctly expressed," said Jones, with a sniff of disapproval.

"It is an exact copy of the one you executed in the Whalen-Morris sale, except for necessary variations. We have been forced to this course by Mr. Clifton's unfortunate condition, but if it is not satisfactory, my partner will doubtless be able to act in a few days."

Mr. Buckley thought it odd that Clifton could not sign a deed executed by Jones as well as that put together by Ruford, but the well-known probity of the firm with which he was dealing prevented any serious doubts and he said he was satisfied.

Jones examined the paper and found it correct in every particular, so the work was finished without particular delay.

Gilmore signed his name in a bold hand, and Jones and Ruford became witnesses to the transaction. Then Gilmore again counted the twenty thousand dollars and put the money in the breast-pocket of his coat.

For weal or woe, the work was done; the Golden Brick had passed from the hands of Clifton & Gilmore.

The junior partner showed none of the gloom which had beset him in the morning. His face was firm and composed, and one would have said he was rather glad the mine was no longer partially his.

Perhaps it was the fact that twenty thousand dollars were in his pocket that made the change in his feelings.

By the time the transaction was completed, it was an hour after dark. There was nothing left to tell of it in visible signs. Both money and deed had disappeared. The latter had been carefully stowed away by Buckley, after Gilmore handed it to him.

"I will now bid you good-evening, gentlemen," said the ex-owner. "Mr. Buckley, you will receive the keys from Ruford, and from this hour ceases my active life in Stonewall Bend."

"I understand you are going to Denver," said Jones.

"Yes."

"Allow me to wish good luck to you, and to—Mrs. Gilmore!"

The young man's face changed quickly.

"To whom do you refer?" he somewhat harshly asked.

"To Stella Clifton, that is, of course. Come now, Gilmore, don't look so black. I meant no harm."

"And none is done, Mr. Jones; but I will remind you that Miss Clifton is not yet Mrs. Gilmore. Enough of this, however. I am now going to my partner. He has a safe which will hold this money safer than I can do."

He tapped his coat at the point where rested the sum received for the Golden Brick, and then shook hands all around, and went out.

"A fine young man," said Jones.

"So I judged," Buckley agreed.

"Pity we are to lose him here. He is one of the men who would make a mark if he remained until Idaho became a State."

"He is to marry Clifton's daughter, eh?"

"Yes; it is all settled. All parties are agreed, and I suppose the partners will hang together in Denver as they have done here."

Buckley remained to give some directions to Ruford, whom he intended to retain as a clerk,

and then went out accompanied by Jones. They went at once to the hotel, where they spent an hour over a bottle of wine, and then Jones went home and Buckley made his way to his room.

Naturally, his first step was to examine the paper which gave him possession of the Golden Brick, which he proceeded to do by the aid of the dull light.

One glance, however, was enough to make him start, and then he plunged his hand into his pocket again. No scrap of paper remained there.

He leaped to his feet so suddenly that he overturned his chair.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed, "this is not the deed!"

He was right. The paper he held in his hand, though of the same shape as the deed, was but a worthless memorandum of some past transactions of Clifton & Gilmore.

CHAPTER VI.

A MISSING MAN.

MR. BUCKLEY was startled for a moment; but second thought convinced him the matter would be all right. It was Gilmore, himself, who had handed the paper to him, and, of course, it had been a mistake on his part. Very likely the deed was at that moment resting in the desk at the office.

This belief was not enough to make Mr. Buckley rest easy all night, and he at once put on his hat and walked to the office. It was closed; but he knew where Ruford lived, and at once hunted him up. Together they retraced their way to the office.

Once there the desk was opened and the contents examined; but the deed was not to be found.

Buckley's face became a shade anxious.

"This is odd!" he observed.

"Mr. Gilmore probably put it in his pocket accidentally," answered Ruford. "It cannot have been lost. Probably you will find him at Clifton's, now, if you go there at once."

"I'll do it. You may lock up the office and I'll see you in the morning."

The new owner of the Golden Brick lost no time; but hastened toward Clifton's. He had serious fears that the deed was lost—perhaps, burned as waste paper. He could not see how Gilmore could accidentally put it in his pocket. In case it was lost, he had only the honor of the former owners upon which to depend for justice. Stonewall Bend had not progressed far enough to have that *minutiae* of law which records business transactions, and if the deed was lost and Clifton & Gilmore proved dishonest, his twenty thousand dollars would be irrevocably lost, he feared.

But he told himself there was no fear of trouble and tried to believe what he said.

It was a comparative short journey to Clifton's house, and he was soon knocking at the door.

It was opened by a Chinaman, and Buckley promptly asked to see Clifton. Wah Ho had seen him before, and he was conducted to the master's presence at once.

Clifton was alone when he entered. He saw that, at once, and an anxious look came to his face which was not caused by sympathy with the gentleman's bandaged knee.

The senior partner was a man of about sixty years, but, though his hair and beard were quite gray, he still possessed a robust frame, as well as an air of solidity and respectability like what one is prone to associate with eminent business men.

His face lighted at sight of Buckley.

"Ah! my dear sir, I am glad to see you!" he said, genially. "I was just wondering how much longer that business would last. Where is Gilmore?"

The question was smilingly asked, but to Buckley it was like the sting of a serpent. He gave an unmistakable start and a deeper shadow came to his face.

"Just what I was about to ask you. Has he been gone a great while?"

"Gone? He hasn't been here since three o'clock."

"What does that mean?"

"To what do you refer?"

"He said he was coming here to deliver to you the money I paid him."

"So he is, but I suppose you walked faster than he—since it seems you did not come together."

"But the business was finished two hours ago, and he left the office saying he was coming here at once."

"He has been delayed somehow," answered Clifton, in an easy tone which indicated he had no fears for his absent partner. "Sit down, Mr. Buckley, and wait for him. My knee is a trifle easier, and I think I can talk coherently."

Buckley sat down, but he failed to share Clifton's confidence. It seemed very strange to him that a man should idle about the village when he had twenty thousand dollars in his pocket—and the deed!

He hesitated about telling Mr. Clifton about the missing paper, and it seemed probable the genial-speaking gentleman little suspected the

state of his guest's mind as they maintained a rather one-sided conversation.

"It's odd Gilmore does not come," admitted the senior partner, at the end of half an hour.

"So I think. Do you suppose he has gone to his own house?"

"I hope not," said Clifton, frowning. "It was plainly agreed that he should come here at once and deposit the money in our safe. It is the more singular because Gilmore is a man of business and social punctuality."

"I think I will go to his rooms and see if he is there," said Buckley, uneasily.

"Do you wish to see him on private business? If not, I can attend to whatever you have to say."

Buckley hesitated for a moment, but ended by telling what he knew about the missing deed. He took the trouble to watch his companion as he spoke, and Clifton's quick frown did not escape his notice.

"This is very singular!" he exclaimed; then, after a pause, he added, in a calmer voice: "Can it be an accident has occurred to Gilmore? I never knew him dilatory about business before, and you say it is nearly three hours since he left the office to bring the money here. Will you oblige me by rapping on the door? It will summon my Chinese servant, and I will send him in quest of Gilmore."

All was done as suggested, and when the man had gone away Clifton and Buckley talked fitfully while awaiting further developments. Both looked anxious, though the latter was the most noticeably affected.

At the end of half an hour the messenger returned. He had been to Gilmore's room, to the hotel and to the closed office of the Golden Brick, but he could neither find the missing man nor gain any trace of him.

He had made diligent, but useless, inquiry.

"By Jupiter! this is strange!" exclaimed Clifton.

"What do you make of it?" Buckley anxiously asked.

"Neither head nor tail unless—Wait! Wah Ho, send Miss Clifton here."

The order was obeyed and the girl soon entered. She was remarkably pretty—even then Buckley noticed it—with a gentle, but intelligent, face, and an abundance of light-brown hair which needed no artificial means to make it wave over brow and neck, and in looking at her the new owner of the Golden Brick forgot his troubles for a while.

Her father introduced her and then added:

"Stella, when did you see Ross Gilmore last?"

"Why, this afternoon, when he called to see you."

"I didn't know but you had seen him this evening."

"No; I have not."

"Did he mention where he would be?"

"He said he would call here, as he had business with you, but I have not seen him. Why do you ask?"

"Because he is late; that's all. Doubtless, he will arrive very soon."

Clifton dismissed his daughter without having aroused more than a vague feeling of uneasiness, and then the two men looked at each other sharply.

"What do you make of it?" Buckley asked, for the second time.

"I can't understand it at all. Such delay is so foreign to Gilmore's usual promptness that I have no explanation to make, but when I remember the sum of money he had with him, my fears prompt me to apprehend foul play. There are plenty of men in Stonewall Bend who would cut his throat ten times over for that bonanza."

There was a ring of genuine alarm in Clifton's voice.

"Suppose he has been made way with," said Buckley, a touch of hostility in his voice, "how will it affect us?"

"Well, unless the money can be recovered, I am about ten thousand dollars out."

"And what of myself?" brusquely continued Buckley.

"You?"

"Yes."

"What do you mean?"

"I have reason to believe my deed was in his pocket."

Buckley looked sharply into his companion's eyes, and he could not avoid noticing the quick gleam which shot through them. It was gone in a moment, however, and Mr. Clifton evenly replied:

"As it would be no use to a stranger, it is likely the document would be held for ransom, and as it would have but a nominal value, in such a case, to you, we could easily frustrate whoever tried to raise anything on it. But let us not take so gloomy a view of the matter; Gilmore always went armed, and I have faith to believe he will eventually appear, safe and sound. It would be a hard fighter that should get away with him."

Why it was Buckley could not tell, but he thought of the horseshoe sport who had come on the stage with him, and though he had been rather favorably impressed at the time, he fell

to wondering if the man might not be a black-leg who had dogged him to Stonewall Bend to steal the money.

If anything really was wrong, it would do no harm to look up Horseshoe Hank's whereabouts at the time.

He could not, however, any longer sit there and wait inactively, and he told Mr. Clifton he would go out and look for Mr. Gilmore himself. Something might have detained him, and there was nothing like looking for him promptly.

As he went he was afflicted with grave fears and in his mind he was constantly revolving the question: If harm had really come to Ross Gilmore, and money and deed had disappeared together, how would the senior partner deal with him?

The Golden Brick was his by all moral and legal rights, but he knew he could not hold it without the deed, if Clifton saw fit to swear the bargain had never been made and no money paid.

That he would do this seemed very unlikely, for he was reputed thoroughly honest; but Buckley remembered that sudden gleam in his eyes, and felt ill at ease.

If he lost the Golden Brick, he was a ruined man.

CHAPTER VII.

TRACING ROSS GILMORE.

WITHOUT losing any time Buckley began his search, and proceeded to cover the same ground the Chinaman had done before him—Gilmore's room, the hotel, the office, and all places where it seemed likely he would be found.

But no one had seen Gilmore since he left the office early in the evening—unless they lied.

It was nearly eleven o'clock when he went for a second time to Clifton's house. He found that gentleman bathing his knee in a well-known remedy for sprains and kindred injuries, but Ross Gilmore was still conspicuous for his absence.

The senior partner seemed as much troubled as was Buckley, but he said it would be wholly useless to do more that night. If the missing man was all right he would appear in the morning, while it was clear he could not be traced during the night.

Buckley did not agree with him, and he silently pronounced the verdict proof of Clifton's lukewarmness, if nothing more. What man would waste time with ten thousand dollars at stake? Certainly, not Amos Buckley.

Such being the case, he was assailed with the horrible suspicion that, if both money and deed were really lost, Clifton intended to hold fast to the Golden Brick mine. He could do it, Buckley felt sure, since he was a power in Stonewall Bend, and he—the new owner—was a stranger. In new countries, such things count a good deal.

"He may buy up Jones and Ruford, so that they will swear that no deed was ever executed, and no money paid," thought the purchaser, mopping the perspiration from his forehead. "I will go to the hotel and get somebody to help me in my search."

He went, and found the saloon full of men, the greater part of whom were gambling, drinking and smoking. In the midst of them one man sat composed and idle, except that his keen gaze was always scanning his neighbors.

This was Horseshoe Hank, but he was really less alive to what was going on around him than he seemed to be.

During the day he had seen Mira Garrett at a distance. She had not changed greatly during the fourteen months since she fled with the man in the brown coat, except that she had grown noticeably older and a little careworn, while her face had that hard look peculiar to women who cut loose from the better road in life.

She was still pretty, however, and for awhile Hank had felt that he would willingly forgive her if she would return to him; but he was not quite a fool, and he put the impulse aside. He did not even speak to her, nor show himself, but watched for hours for some one to visit her, that he might know, if possible, who had won her heart.

He had kept his post until dark, when Dandelion Dan relieved him at his own request, and Hank was making himself at home in the saloon and considering the question: What was he to do when he knew the name of Mira's lover?

Never had he been further from a decision than on that evening.

He felt a desire for vengeance, but how was it to be won? By shooting his successful rival? Certainly not; he was not an assassin; and he was not sure but his rival was partially excusable.

If the unknown had loved Mira as much as he did the elopement was natural, if not honorable.

But how had it resulted to Mira? Was she a happy wife, or was there a dark page in the past on which light had never been thrown? On the solution of this riddle Horseshoe Hank felt that his future depended, though he had a strong opinion that Mira would not in any case thank him for interfering—nor was he sure he had a right to interfere.

But he had been robbed, his future had been

blasted, and the spirit of revenge was strong within him. And if the matter grew serious, it would be found that the horseshoe sport was a bad enemy to face.

Such were the thoughts that were in his mind at the moment Amos Buckley chanced to observe him; but, ignorant of all this, the gentleman, forgetting his suspicion that sport might know something about the disappearance of the money, leaped to the conclusion that he saw just the man he needed to aid him in his search.

True, Hank was a stranger in Stonewall Bend, but he was sharp, brave and resolute—just the man to act the part of an amateur detective.

He walked to his side and greeted him cordially; and as he was not in a mood for an elaborate preface, plunged at once into business.

"Are you busy?" he asked.

"You can see," answered Hank, smiling.

"Well, if it isn't presuming too much, I would like to have your help to find a certain man."

The sport looked at him keenly.

"How can I help you? I am a stranger here."

"True, but you look like a man likely to succeed in what you undertake."

The younger man laughed lightly.

"Do you judge by this?" he asked, touching the golden horseshoe on his hat.

"What do you mean?"

"Why, you know the old fancy about a horseshoe bringing good-luck? I have adopted the above for my trade-mark, and to my *sobriquet* of Horseshoe Hank, I add 'The Man of Big Luck,' meaning, unusually good luck. See?"

"Yes, but I prefer natural keenness, such as I am sure you possess. Now, I want to find a certain man, as I before said, and if you will help me—"

"Sorry, my dear sir, but I shall have to decline. I have all I can do to manage my own affairs. Here are plenty of men who will jump at the chance."

"Fellows with whom I want no dealing; mere ruffians."

"I believe you are a trifle harsh, but I suppose you have sized them to suit you. I think they are all well enough."

Hank ceased speaking abruptly, and then arose in the same manner and walked toward the door Dandelion Dan had just entered, and by a motion he indicated he had something to say to his employer.

"Well?" questioned the latter, quickly.

"She's had a visitor, pard," the Dancing Daisy said.

"Who?"

"Now, you hev me, though I hev ther critter's phizmahogany in my mind so that I kin recognize him when I see him ag'in. More nor that, I hev see'd him sence we struck town, and I know whar he hangs out. He's either one o' ther firm o' Clifton & Gilmore, or a clerk."

The name was not new to Hank. He remembered Lida Deane and the mention she had made of Clifton, of that firm, and he seemed treading on familiar ground.

"So he's visited her?"

"Yas, a few."

"Where did he go afterward?"

"Durned ef I kin tell. He was in ther cabin nigh onter half an hour, durin' which period I waited outside. When he came out an' waltzed away I went arter him, but from ther way he dodged me I s'pect he knew he was follered an' outdid me. 'Tenyrate, be outdid me. Now, don't go fur ter pour ther vials o' yer wrath onter me, fur I did my best, an' I kin identify ther galoot when I see him."

"All right, Daniel. What was his age?"

"Bout twenty-five, I reckon."

"It must have been Gilmore," said Hank, thoughtfully. "We'll learn for sure, to-morrow, for I am anxious to know who is visiting Mira. Gilmore! Yes, I'll see him!"

Horseshoe Hank would have spoken less confidently had he known all Mr. Buckley began to fear about Ross Gilmore.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE CASE DEVELOPS.

THE missing man was not found that night, but Mr. Buckley was astir at an early hour the following morning and searching for him. He went first to his lodgings; Gilmore had not been there during the night.

Buckley next walked toward Clifton's, his face bent to a scowl, his mind very busy.

"It seems to me as though the man has run away with the twenty thousand dollars," he thought. "It is not likely he has met with foul play. His road lay in the very heart of the town, the hour was early evening and he always went armed. Foul play? Nonsense! He has run away with the money. The main question now is, will Clifton be honest enough to see that I have the Golden Brick, regardless of the fact that the deed is missing? I wish I was sure he was not in alliance with Gilmore. It would be a very pretty trick for them to sell the mine, steal the deed, let one

partner run away with the money, while the other should declare there had been no sale and hang on to the mine. Is that the game?"

Buckley's face was very grave and anxious as he mutely asked the question. Nearly all the money he had in the world was risked in the Golden Brick; if it was lost he was a beggar.

He reached Clifton's house and found that gentleman moving about with the aid of a cane. He had improved perceptibly since the previous night.

"Well, what news?" he cried, quickly.

"Don't you know?" demanded Buckley, somewhat brusquely; for it seemed Clifton was resting easy when an honest man would be at work.

But Buckley had made at least one error.

"Not yet," Clifton answered. "I sent out Wah Ho half an hour ago, but he has not yet returned."

"Well, Gilmore has not been at his room during the night."

Clifton uttered an exclamation.

"The matter begins to look serious."

"What do you infer?"

"That Gilmore has met with foul play."

"How could that be? He had but a hundred yards to go when he left the office, saying he was coming directly here; it was early in the evening and he was well armed. Foul play, in my opinion, is out of the question."

"What, then, do you infer?" Clifton slowly asked.

"Simply that Gilmore has absconded!"

"Impossible!"

"Why so?"

"He is an honest man."

"Mr. Clifton, after I paid over my money Gilmore took the deed, which had been lying on the table, open, and folded it. After some further talk he handed me what I thought was the paper, and I put it in my pocket. When I looked at it, lo! it was not the deed, but a worthless memorandum. Now, sir, why did Gilmore play this trick on me? It looks very much as though he had deliberately formed a plan of running away with both deed and money."

"What could he want of the deed?"

Mr. Clifton asked the question as innocently as though it referred to a two cent morning daily, and though his companion looked at him keenly, he failed to detect guilt on that refined, aristocratic face.

Yet, it seemed to him Clifton was overdoing the matter. No one could fail to see what a serious matter the losing of the deed was, and Buckley grew freshly suspicious.

"Well," he said, "whatever he may want of it, I know what I want of it, and I suggest that, if he does not appear by noon, we draw up another paper."

"That will be the best way," said Clifton, readily.

The Chinaman was indeed back, but he brought no news. He had been everywhere where Ross Gilmore seemed likely to have been, but no one had seen him since the previous day.

Buckley and Clifton were looking at each other in utter silence when the door was unceremoniously opened and Francis Nelson entered. He will be remembered as the friend of Ross Gilmore, introduced in our fifth chapter. People in Stonewall Bend knew them as a species of modern David and Jonathans, and Clifton was not surprised to see an excited look on Nelson's face.

"What is this I hear about Ross being missing?" he demanded, without any preface whatever.

"Well, I really can't tell you. He is missing, and we have thus far failed to get any clew to his whereabouts. Perhaps you can aid us?"

"Unfortunately, no. I have not seen him since yesterday morning. What can have happened to him?"

"Nothing, except that he has run away with twenty thousand dollars stolen money," bitterly answered Buckley.

Nelson turned upon him with flashing eyes.

"Sir! how dare you make such a charge?" he demanded, in a voice which made the other quail a little.

"I judge by circumstances," he sulkily replied.

"Beware how you make your opinions public. Ross Gilmore is not only the most honest of men, but he is my friend, and no man shall speak against him in my presence. He turn thief? I would as soon think of the sun turning to brass. You are either mistaken or willfully falsifying, sir!"

Buckley was not particularly affected by this outburst. He knew young men were subject to impulsive courses, but the wisdom of age had taught him that they amounted to but little, and he would believe in Ross Gilmore's honesty more readily when it was proven, not merely asserted.

Still, he was favorably impressed by Nelson, and he made a moderate and conciliatory reply, at the same time asking for Mr. Nelson's opinion on the subject.

It was given, but need hardly be recorded.

Francis admitted the case was "a little odd," and though he advanced several theories, there was none to which the elder men turned with confidence.

The only sure thing they could discover was that Nelson had unbounded faith in his friend's honor.

They were still conversing when Wah Ho announced another visitor and Horseshoe Hank entered.

The sport appeared dressed in his best, with the elaboration of a city man, though, as usual, free from dandyism, and he seemed as cool as the eternal hills. Clifton looked at him with evident want of favor, but it was not the first time the Man of Big Luck had been snubbed.

"I understand you are looking for a missing man," he observed.

"Yes," said Buckley, quickly.

"Possibly I may be able to give you a bit of information; if my tidings as to how you stand are correct, I surely can. As I understand it, Mr. Ross Gilmore disappeared from your knowledge when he left the office at seven o'clock."

"You are right."

"Well, I can prove that he made a call on a certain person later than that—between seven and eight."

"Who was the person?" Buckley quickly asked.

"One Mira Garrett!"

Nelson started a little and looked at the sport keenly, but did not speak.

"Who is Mira Garrett?" Buckley asked.

Clifton turned toward Nelson.

"I do not know; perhaps this gentleman can inform us."

"I can give no definite information," Francis answered. "Miss Garrett lives alone in a cabin at the west end of the village, but I am not acquainted with her. Neither can I believe Gilmore called on her."

"Why not?"

"Well, he is not the man to go calling on other ladies besides the one to whom he is engaged."

Horseshoe Hank thought he detected a little embarrassment in Nelson's manner and drew a conclusion. In his opinion there was more between Ross Gilmore and Mira Garrett than the world at large knew, and Francis was seeking to defend his friend.

"We can only believe what we know," said Buckley, with the philosophy of mature years. "But you, Horseshoe Hank, what reason have you for believing Gilmore called on Miss Garrett?"

"He was seen to do so by Dandelion Dan."

"Who is that?" Clifton demanded.

"The Dancing Daisy, sir."

"Don't talk rubbish to me!" exclaimed the elder man. "These absurd western *sobriquets* disgust me. Tell me in plain words who this Dan is."

Hank obeyed and told the whole truth about Gilmore's visit to Mira, except that he said Dan was waiting for him—Hank—near the cabin. He did not see fit to say that Dancing Daisy was watching there, by his orders, to see who, if any one, would visit the girl. His own life-drama he preferred to keep out of sight.

Buckley looked sharply at Clifton. He thought he saw a reason for Ross Gilmore's flight. He was betrothed to Stella Clifton, but, really, loved Mira Garrett. Having resolved to avoid his already settled marriage, he had only waited until he obtained possession of the twenty thousand dollars and then fled. But one thing was not clear—why had Mira been left behind?

"I think we had better see this girl, at once," he said, abruptly, addressing Clifton.

"You are right; we will go immediately. I can walk there with the aid of a crutch," Clifton answered.

It was thus settled and the four men left the house. The two last named went at once on their errand, but Horseshoe Hank attached himself to Nelson, though the latter gave evidence that he did not desire his company.

"What sort of a girl is this Miss Garrett?" asked the Man of Big Luck.

"I know nothing about her," curtly answered Francis.

"Are you sure?"

"What do you mean?"

"Simply this; I suspect there was a love affair between her and Gilmore and that you know of the fact."

Nelson's face flushed with anger.

"Allow me to say you don't know what you are talking about. If it wouldn't be a waste of time I would knock you down. I want it distinctly understood that Ross Gilmore is a man of honor, and being engaged to Miss Stella Clifton, he would not have anything to do with another woman. But why do you chip in, anyway? What is Gilmore, or Mira Garrett, to you?"

"Nothing," replied Hank, calmly.

"Then you had better attend to your own affairs."

"Your heat betrays the fact that my suspicion was not groundless," the sport evenly continued.

Francis clinched his hand as though anxious

to carry out his threat of knocking Hank down; but the latter did not seem a good subject for pugilistic enterprise, and the young man suddenly wheeled and strode away without another word.

The Man of Big Luck looked after him thoughtfully.

"He's an honest fellow, as the world goes; but I'll bet my hat Gilmore cared more for Mira than he did for Stella, and that Mr. Nelson knew it. He wants to defend his friend; but he's got an up-hill row to hoe. As for the missing man, unless I am much mistaken, he is the man with whom Mira ran away when she deserted me."

He had not forgotten that slip of paper on which he found what he thought was the fragments of a name: "—s G—."

What was more likely than that this was a portion of *Ross Gilmore*?

CHAPTER IX.

MIRA GARRETT.

CLIFTON and Buckley went at once to the cabin and knocked at the door. It was opened by a young woman that each mentally pronounced the same for whom they sought.

She was rather handsome; but, to one who believed feminine excellence lay in gentleness and modesty, scarcely attractive. Her eyes were bold and almost defiant, and even then they noticed the hard look on her face—a look which few women who live peaceful lives ever bear.

"Is this Miss Garrett?" Buckley asked.

"Yes," she answered, slowly, as she looked first at one and then at the other, and always searchingly.

"We have called to inquire for Ross Gilmore."

"Ross Gilmore?" she repeated, inquiringly.

"Yes."

"I do not understand what you mean, sir," she said, quietly.

"We want to know where he is?"

"So I comprehend; but I cannot see why you come here. I am not acquainted with the gentleman."

"He was here last evening."

"Here?"

There was real, or fictitious, surprise in her voice.

"Yes."

"You are mistaken. He was not here last evening, nor do I know that he was ever here. I repeat, I am not acquainted with the gentleman."

"Then how did it happen he called here?"

"Sir!" she exclaimed, her eyes flashing, "haven't I just told you he did not call?"

"We have it on good authority that he did," doggedly continued Buckley.

"Your informant is a liar!" curtly replied the young woman.

"And you know nothing of Gilmore?"

"Nothing. I am not his keeper, as I wish you to distinctly understand. Is your business ended?"

"Well, yes, if—"

Thus far had Mr. Buckley hesitatingly spoken when Miss Garrett unceremoniously closed the door in their faces, and they heard a slight jar as she placed a bar in position. Amos looked blankly at his companion; but the latter, who was a man not easily disturbed, took him by the arm and led him away.

"It is my opinion we have been deceived," he said. "I believe that fellow who claimed he saw Gilmore enter there, lied. The story seemed improbable to me, at the first, and now I believe this Garrett girl has told the truth. Better see the fellow—Dandelion Dan, or whatever he calls himself—and bribe him to tell the truth. If he does, I take it this story will be exploded."

"Well, what is your opinion of Gilmore's disappearance?"

Clifton hesitated.

"I have always believed him an honest man," he finally said, "and I am sure he worshiped my daughter. Such being the case, I cannot believe he would abscond for the sake of that miserable money. If he has, it will kill Stella!"

The speaker's voice trembled perceptibly.

Buckley had nearly abandoned his former suspicion that Clifton might be in a plot to rob him, and they soon parted with a cordial grasp of the hand. The new owner of the Golden Brick went at once to the office. He found Mr. Ruford, the clerk, at the desk, engaged as usual though, as that gentleman had just been thinking, he did not know who he was working for. It might be Amos Buckley, or Clifton & Gilmore, or merely Parker Clifton.

"No sign of the deed yet, Mr. Ruford?"

"None, sir," the clerk replied. "I have looked the place over from corner to corner; it is not here."

"Then Gilmore must have taken it away with him."

"So it seems."

Buckley could not avoid a bitter exclamation.

Twenty years he had fought hard against the world, and with good success, but he saw all his savings in danger.

"Will you answer one question frankly, Mr. Ruford?"

"Certainly, sir."

"Well, in your opinion, what will Mr. Clifton do about the mine if the deed is not found?"

"Why, sir, what can be done? There is but one way. You have bought the Golden Brick and paid for it, and it is yours beyond the shadow of a doubt."

"Yes, but suppose Clifton should say: 'I have not received one dollar in payment, nor do I personally know such a payment has been made. Produce the deed and the Golden Brick is yours; otherwise, it remains mine.' What could I say, or do, in such a case?"

"Well, I really don't know," Ruford admitted. "The deed is not recorded, and, though I never had experience in such a case, I am afraid you could not hold the mine without the paper. I'm afraid my word and that of Jones would avail little in court, while Clifton is so popular that if he saw fit to make a stand, nearly every man in Stonewall Bend would rally to his standard and help keep you away from the Golden Brick. Ay, Clifton might, if he were not so honest a man, place your very life in jeopardy if you insisted on possession. In Idaho, men in his position can rule a town, while a stranger has no show at all."

This presentation of the case almost crushed Buckley. He saw his gravest fears shared as an opinion by another, though that other, with a cautious choice of words, took care to give the opinion that Clifton would not do anything of the kind.

"He sees the possibility that Clifton will retain the mine!" thought the new owner, in despair. "By George, I will go to him at once and ask him to execute a new deed!"

He arose abruptly and left the office, but at the door he met Clifton, himself. That gentleman's face bore a grave look, but it brightened a trifle at sight of Buckley.

"More news," he said.

"Well?"

"Another man has appeared to testify that Gilmore was at the Garrett woman's house. He will swear that he went there at half-past seven, last evening, to carry a package of groceries for her, and saw Gilmore sitting in the kitchen."

"That settles it, then."

"It settles the fact that Gilmore is false to my daughter," said Clifton, hotly. "Even when engaged to her, and talking in a honeyed style, he was also the lover of the Garrett woman. Poor Stella! this will prove a terrible blow. My last hope is gone, and I believe that, partly to avoid the marriage he had arranged for, Gilmore has absconded."

"But why did he leave the Garrett woman?"

"Because she would have been a clog during his flight, and have made detection more likely. Of course she will join him later."

"Then you have given up all hope?"

"I see no reason for continuing to hope. Gilmore has run away, taking my ten thousand dollars with him. For that I care less than for the fact that he has deserted Stella. I could wring his villainous neck for that!"

Silence prevailed for awhile, but Buckley was trying to find words with which to approach a delicate subject.

"Such being the case," he finally said, "I suppose it would be best for us to draw up a new deed."

"How?"

Buckley repeated his former insinuation.

"I do not see how that can be done," said Clifton, slowly, and looking at his companion's feet. "Since you buy the mine of Clifton & Gilmore, one partner cannot sign over the Golden Brick to you."

"But on what am I to depend for my rights?" desperately asked the new owner.

"The deed may be recovered. I shall put detectives on Gilmore's track, in which work you, of course, will be ready to join and contribute your mite."

"But suppose the deed is not recovered?"

"Then we will reconsider the matter."

"Will you sign a paper stating the facts of the case up to the present time, and—"

"My dear sir, we will let the matter rest as it is for the present," said Clifton, decisively. "Of course we are going to arrest Gilmore and recover whatever he has with him. When this is done we can leave the subject which is just now most important—to find him. I will bid you good-day and dispatch a messenger to Boise City, offering a reward for the arrest."

And then he went out, leaving Buckley in a miserable frame of mind. He decided that, though Clifton was probably not a party to Gilmore's flight, it would be hard to make him do justice where the Golden Brick was concerned if both money and deed were lost.

"I feel sure he can wind both Ruford and Jones around his finger," thought the unhappy man, "and if he chooses to say he has never received a penny for the mine, nor ever deeded it away, I shall find it desperately hard to maintain my rights. What am I to do?"

Oddly enough, he thought of Horseshoe Hank in this emergency, and though the sport had once refused to be hired at any price, he

Horseshoe Hank.

decided to seek him again. Somehow, he regarded him as the sharpest man in Stonewall Bend, and if he could attach him to his cause he would feel a ray of hope.

He lost no time in finding the sport.

"I have come to you to beg that you will reconsider your decision about helping me as before suggested. No; don't speak; don't refuse; hear my reasons and then—"

"Never mind your reasons; I accept."

"Eh?" and Buckley looked at him in great surprise.

"I accept."

The Man of Big Luck was not jesting, and as Buckley realized that, he hastened to speak further, before he could change his mind.

"I will pay you well—"

"Thank you, but I do not want any pay."

Buckley was still more amazed. Only a little before Hank had refused peremptorily to serve at any price; now he agreed readily to serve without pay. It was a riddle the elder man could not understand.

Had he known the dark chapter in the sport's life, he might not have found it so hard to understand. Hank had changed his mind because he believed the fact established that Gilmore, the absconder, was likewise the man who had run away with Mira Garrett, and by working to bring him to grief, he would not only destroy his rival's ambition, but avenge his personal wrongs.

"How can we work?" Buckley asked, when he had grown calmer.

"The country must be flooded with descriptions of the thief, so that he will be recognized wherever he goes, and Mira Garrett must be constantly watched. Sooner or later she will try to join him, and when she moves she must be followed."

"But what if she don't go?"

"She will. Such was their understanding beyond a doubt, though in arranging it they did not suspect we should to-day know of their intimacy. Gilmore thought that a secret from the whole world. If he could see her to-day he would tell her to remain here a year rather than go to him; but they will not dare communicate with each other, and by and by she will start and—be followed."

"You think he intends to desert Miss Clifton and marry the Garrett woman?"

"I suspect they are already married, but that part is of no consequence. Enough that they are in league. And now, as I said before, I am with you in this, and I will help you to bring Gilmore to grief. I swear it!"

CHAPTER X.

STELLA SEEKS INFORMATION.

It was a little past noon when, as Francis Nelson sat in his room, smoking absent-mindedly, there was a knock at his door. He lived in the hotel, and things were not conducted with ceremony there, so he kept his seat and bade the applicant enter.

Prompt obedience followed, but Mr. Nelson no sooner beheld the visitor than he hurriedly arose.

It was Stella Clifton.

He looked at her in amazement, for he felt sure it was the first time she had ever set foot in the hotel; but as he saw that her face was pale and her eyes red, the reason of her visit flashed upon him.

"Miss Clifton!" he said, awkwardly. "I am surprised to see you, but I beg that you will accept a chair."

"I will," she answered steadily, "for I want to have a serious talk with you. I should have sent for you, but I wished to see you at once."

"I am at your service."

His tone and manner were both very awkward for a man of the world, but he knew what was coming, and what no other person in the world did know. Often, in the past, when he met Ross Gilmore daily and men wondered at their friendship, the latter had talked to him of Stella and the marriage which seemed daily growing nearer, and Nelson had forced himself to smile and hide the fierce pain which gnawed at his heart. For he, too, loved this fair girl.

"You have heard those terrible stories about Ross," she now said, coming to business at once.

"There are various theories," he cautiously said.

"Perhaps; but the generally credited one is that his asserted love for me was a pretense; that he was all the while infatuated with Mira Garrett—perhaps married to her; that he took notice of me only to gain greater favor with my father, and that, having secured possession of twenty thousand dollars, he has now run away with it, leaving Miss Garrett to follow later."

"This is a terrible arraignment," said Francis, nervously drawing his hand across his face; her steadfast gaze troubled him.

"I am only repeating common rumor."

"Let us hope it is not true."

"Let us hope!" Mr. Nelson, do you too believe him guilty?" she quickly asked.

"No! I cannot, will not believe it!"

"You do not speak with much energy."

"I am upset, unmanned. This matter has come so unexpectedly, it hits hard. But I will believe nothing against him."

She saw that he avoided her gaze.

"You have been his friend; his confidant in many things; and ought to know—"

"He has never told me he cared for Mira Garrett," interrupted Francis, with an earnestness which bespoke complete sincerity.

"Have you ever suspected it?"

"No."

"Why do you hesitate? If you think Ross innocent, your manner wrongs him; if you believe him guilty, you should have the frankness to tell me so. We have called ourselves friends, and I have tried to use you well. Now, I ask you to be frank with me."

"I told you he had never said anything to lead me to suspect he cared for her."

"That question was asked and answered some time ago. The one now presented to you is, have you ever had reason to suspect he cared for her?"

Miss Clifton spoke steadily and her eyes were dry, but Nelson knew she was suffering keenly.

"If I owe a debt to you, do I not also owe one to him?" he desperately asked.

"I can admire the man who stands by his friend in adversity, but not in guilt."

Francis did not answer; instead he looked out of the window, a most unhappy expression on his face.

"I thought you my friend, but I now see I was mistaken," she added.

The remark caused him to wheel suddenly.

"Miss Clifton," he cried, his face full of eagerness, "for you I would do anything—"

He paused as suddenly as he had begun, and then more quietly, even gravely, added:

"Believe me, I am your friend."

"Then, once more, I ask you to speak."

"It is a most painful thing to do; I would almost cut off my right hand rather than obey; but you have placed me where I cannot escape. If I pain you, may Heaven forgive me. I will admit I have known that Gilmore was a visitor at Mira Garrett's house!"

"And you never told me?"

"Heaven forgive me if I did wrong, but I did not tell you. I never suspected matters were so bad as is now hinted. People half-suspect the Garrett girl is, really, Mrs. Ross Gilmore. I never suspected that, nor that she was any worse than the rest of us. I knew Gilmore went there, but I am, unfortunately, a man, and as such I judged the affair. 'A mere flirtation,' I thought, 'which will be forever discontinued when he marries Miss Clifton.' Had I suspected what now seems to be the truth, I should have told you, but I did not. Ross was my friend; I loved him like a brother; and, perhaps, I looked on what I saw with more leniency than I should have done had it been any other man. We were friends, and, for my part, friends in word, thought and deed. I hid the secret of his wrong-doing, and for that I feel that I have forfeited your esteem forever!"

There was an accent of keen regret in his voice which touched Stella, but he need not have feared; even in her sorrow she did not forget to be just.

"Strictly speaking, you ought to have told me, but I have lived long enough not to expect such chivalry, and I forgive you freely. I only ask that you will be frank now; do this and we are still friends. What more can you tell?"

He reflected for a moment.

"Very little, unless I refer to a conversation we had yesterday morning. I met Ross, and he told me Mr. Clifton had finally decided to sell the Golden Brick and remove to Denver. He was in a gloomy mood and confessed that he was sorry to leave Stonewall Bend; as he expressed it, he 'had reasons for wishing to remain.' I commenced to say I knew what these reasons were, but he interrupted and bade me say nothing."

"They were not definitely mentioned?"

"No; for Ross, as I said, was in a very gloomy mood. I believe his conscience was reproaching him, just then. He acknowledged that he owed a good deal to Mr. Clifton, and spoke of you with the highest respect, and I did not then suspect he intended to flee. Indeed, it is my opinion that, if the Garrett woman had had no hold on him, he would have put temptation behind him and been true to you."

"I am going to see Miss Garrett!"

"You?"

"Yes."

"Stella!—Miss Clifton, you would not do that!"

"I am going, and alone!"

"But she is not the kind of a woman—"

"Let us not forget justice," the girl steadily answered. "Mira Garrett is not a hard character; there are worse, of her own sex, in Stonewall Bend. I have seen her. She is, I judge, a girl who has been in contact with the world until she no longer believes brass to be gold; but she does not look low. She may be my successful rival—which proves she is not all bad, for Ross Gilmore's taste was refined—but I will still do her justice!"

Francis did not answer, but though there was

a doubtful look on his face which Stella did not fail to observe, it did not change her resolution.

She arose, bade good-day to Nelson and went out. He saw by her manner that she did not want his company any longer where they were, or during the contemplated visit, and he was wise enough not to suggest it.

It was not many minutes later when she knocked at the door of the cabin. It was promptly opened and Mira Garrett appeared. Her face had an almost expressionless look, which did not change at sight of Stella, but the latter stepped forward and she made way.

The rivals stood under the same roof.

"I have come to speak of Ross Gilmore," said Stella, in an even voice, and with no trace of ill-will.

"I am deeply honored," replied Mira, with a perceptible sneer.

"Do not think I have come to quarrel with or reproach you, for I have no desire to say more than to ask you a few questions. If you will answer them in a straight-forward way, I will ask no more. People say you are Ross Gilmore's wife. Is it true?"

"It seems to me people have gone crazy," observed Miss Garrett, curtly. "You are not the first visitor of the kind I have had to-day, and as I may have more, I mean to post a notice outside which shall say: 'Bureau of Information. Apply here for news of Ross Gilmore.'"

"This is not answering my question," said Stella, patiently.

"No?"

It was an aggravating interrogation, into which the young lady threw all possible venom, but it had no effect.

"I have but two questions," said Stella. "The first is. Are you his wife? and the second, Is he your lover? If you will answer them, I will go away."

"Very good. Take a negative for each and say good-day," Miss Garrett flippantly answered.

"You are not speaking seriously."

"Why should I? Why is every one coming to me for news of Ross Gilmore? I know nothing about him. People say he is my lover, my husband, and so forth. It is the most outrageous nonsense in the world. I know nothing about him; I never spoke to him."

"Veracity, thy name is woman!"

It was a new and mocking voice, and both women turned quickly toward a common point.

Horseshoe Hank stood before them.

CHAPTER XI.

THE EX-LOVERS MEET.

STELLA looked at the handsome sport with indifference, but not so Mira Garrett. She retreated a step and the color receded from her face in a quick rush; everything went to indicate that the knowledge that Horseshoe Hank was in Stonewall Bend was a complete and startling surprise.

On his part, he remained perfectly calm, outwardly and looked at her with an air of indifference.

"I trust that you will overlook this little fiction," he said, finally turning to Miss Clifton, and removing his hat with graceful politeness. "Miss Garrett is peculiar in her ways."

"Allow me to inquire where you are, sir," said Stella, slowly, for she had failed to perceive Mira's emotion and was uncertain what to expect.

"Certainly, certainly. I am Horseshoe Hank, the Man of Big Luck. You may never have heard of me, but our friend cannot say as much."

He moved his hand toward Mira, but she did not answer. She could not at once rally upon so unexpectedly meeting the man she had wronged. Even then she noticed the change in his outward man, and she could not but suspect her treachery had transformed him from a sober Colorado ranchman to the Idaho sport.

Why was he in Stonewall Bend? Was it the result of chance, or had he come for revenge?

"Do I understand you to say Miss Garrett has not spoken the truth?" Stella asked.

"Something akin to that, miss. I don't assume to know all about the gentle lady, but I have reason to believe she knows all about Ross Gilmore. I have in mind a case where a young lady eloped with a gay cavalier, and Mira may have heard of the case, too."

His gaze seemed like that of a serpent to the guilty girl. It was not threatening; on the contrary he looked supremely indifferent; but her heart lay like lead in her bosom, and she felt sure that her quondam lover had appeared as a remorseless enemy.

At the same time, she had a strong nature and she began to grow calmer. She became sullen and defiant, and her gaze met his almost unflinchingly.

"What right have you to interfere with my affairs?" she demanded imperiously.

"I hope I have none, Miss Garrett, nor do I aspire to meddle with your affairs. It is for this other lady I am speaking. I warn you, Miss Clifton, you have not yet heard the truth spoken. I can prove that Ross Gilmore visited

Mira last night, and I have reason to believe he has been her lover for over a year."

"You are a coward, Hank Latham!" Mira bitterly exclaimed. "How dare you attack me thus?"

"Don't mention it. I cannot see that I need any bravery to drop in socially and put matters aright. Had you spoken truthfully I should not have appeared on the scene, but you ought to answer the questions your visitor has asked."

"I will not answer them; I will not give any satisfaction to your friends."

"Quite correct, only you overlook the fact that I haven't a friend in the world. I don't want any; friends are the leeches of one's prosperity, and the adders of his adversity. Don't consider me at all; pass, and make a new trump. All I ask is justice for Miss Clifton."

"I will not talk with either one of you, and I order you to leave my cabin. There is the door!"

Mira stretched out one hand as a guide, as though fearful that they would become confused in the vastness of the fifteen-feet square cabin and fail to find the place of exit.

"I will go, as you say," said Stella, quietly. "Believe me, I did not come here as an enemy; I have no desire to quarrel. I only hoped you would be frank. Good-night!"

She walked quietly out of the room, not once looking around. Horseshoe Hank remained gazing at Mira. She met his gaze as though inviting a quarrel, but after a moment's meditation he turned and departed in silence.

He was barely gone when Mira closed the door with a slam, threw the bar into place and then stood panting behind it. The calmness she had outwardly shown was wholly gone, and her whole face expressed consternation and alarm.

"He here!" she said, in a husky whisper. "He here, of all men! Good heavens what am I to do? He has come for revenge—I know it—and he will be as pitiless as an Indian. I know his nature."

She dropped into a chair and remained staring at vacancy with the same look on her face. Clearly, she had not forced her emotion; she feared; the Man of Big Luck as she would have feared a chaparral tiger.

Hank had not followed Stella, as might be inferred, on the contrary, he took prompt measures, the moment he passed the threshold, to avoid her notice. He could not give her any valuable information in regard to Ross Gilmore, and he had no desire to lay bare his own past for any one's gratification.

He went at once to the hotel, where he found Dandelion Dan disposing of a mysterious compound which came under the general head of "mixed drinks."

"Well, what is the news?" he asked.

"Nary news," answered Daniel. "I hev waltzed around a good bit an' I earned what I could, but thar is nothin' ter show how R. Gilmore, Esquire, went outer town. No hoss is missin', no hoss has b'en away; he didn't go by ther stage; an' it follers ef he did go it was on ther huff, which seems a curious style for a runaway to take."

"Nonsense!" said the sport. "Where is your astuteness, old man? Had I contemplated such a thing, I lookeld previously have brought a strange bo saw a 'town, hid him, and then slid out on the sly's betw' very likely the way Gilmore did."

"I didn't think a hat," Dan acknowledged.

"Has Buckley been around?"

"No."

"He depends on us to find his man."

"I reckon we kin do it."

"I'm not so sure of that. Gilmore is one of the most out-and-out villains I ever saw, and he may be as sharp as he is wicked. He has pulled the wool over people's yes here nicely and, going away, leaves the whole lot on the griddle, as I may express it. Ste.la Clifton loses a lover, Buckley loses his precious deed, old Clifton loses ten thousand dollars—unless he sees fit to play the rascal and hold on to the Golden Brick. The possibility that he may, sends cold shivers down Buckley's spine, and as I take the latter to be the best man of the lot, I shall hang on to his cause and do what I can for him."

Dan did not reply. Had he spoken plainly he would have confessed he did not see the wisdom of helping others while their own search was unfinished, but he was in the pay of his younger friend and did not intend to oppose his plans or wishes.

Horseshoe Hank did not remain long inactive. He seemed, somehow, to feel that he ought to be astir, and he left the hotel and walked down the street.

His course took him past the office of the Golden Brick, and, looking in, he saw Ruford, the clerk, at his post, as busily figuring as though he had no occasion to wonder who would be the man to pay him. Unobserved by him, Hank watched the clerk's face for several seconds, and he could not but see what a doubtful face it was. Mr. Ruford was a suave, well-dressed young man, but he reminded Hank of a person in ambush—an odd fancy, and one the greater part of the Bend's people would have resented as applied to Ruford.

"A hypocrite and blackleg," thought the sport, who did not care a cent for what other people thought in the case. "If Parker Clifton is playing a crooked game, it would not surprise me to know this fellow is a party to it."

He glanced toward the handsome building where resided the rich man and, obeying a languid impulse, walked in that direction. He had nearly reached the house when he abruptly paused.

From the opposite direction two persons were advancing. One was a man of large and admirable proportions. Standing over six feet, he had an immense breadth of shoulders and strong limbs. So might the gladiators of Rome have looked.

But this man had a complexion which betrayed the presence of negro blood; he was a mulatto.

His companion was a young lady, and one the sport recognized at first sight. It was Lida Deane, and as Hank remembered what she had said about her protector, he knew the mulatto was Goliath.

Hank waited for them to approach with undisguised pleasure, but, as they reached Clifton's house, they turned and Goliath knocked at the door.

The sport's brows contracted. He remembered what Lida had said about the mine-owner when Gravel Joe and his pard attacked her, and the subsequent mystery she had thrown about the matter, and wondered what was now taking her there if Clifton was indeed her enemy.

"She is a mystery, like all other women," thought he; but just then the door was opened and he watched with interest to see the result.

He was not in a position to see who had answered their summons, but, whoever it was, there was a brief parley, and then Lida and the mulatto went inside.

"Am I mistaken in thinking Clifton her enemy, or has she gone to beard him in his den for the attack upon her? I reckon I'll hang around and see the result."

So the sport sat down on a boulder, where he would not be likely to be observed from the house, and devoted himself to the work in hand.

He was a patient waiter, when patience seemed necessary, but he grew tired of the delay before the pair reappeared. The minutes wore on, but the front door did not again uncloset, and there was no sign of life about the place except that indicated by the lazily-arising smoke from the chimney.

"Confound it!" he finally exclaimed, "I am a fool to be hanging around here. What is the matter to me, anyway? The girl refused to confide in me, and, though she was friendly and grateful, it isn't likely she would want me spying on her. I'll clear out and attend to my own business."

So saying, he arose and walked rapidly away, his face toward the rough ground northwest of the village.

CHAPTER XII.

HORSESHOE HANK AGAIN BECOMES USEFUL.

THE sport had no particular object in view, and when, after moving among the gulches for awhile, he chanced to observe Lida Deane's cabin as it nestled in the rock-bound glade, it was something akin to a new discovery.

He paused and looked at it for a moment, and then a smile stole over his face.

"I wonder why I came here? I had no definite object, but my footsteps took this course as naturally as life. One would almost say Lida was on my brain, and I'm not sure but that's a fact."

He had thought about her a good deal since their first meeting, for he was impressed by the fact that she was not only a pretty, but a very good, girl, but he would have laughed at the idea that he was infatuated.

He had had a bitter experience with woman once, when Mira Garrett proved so faithless, and though he had braced up against the blow like a man, he believed he was done with the sex so far as affection went.

Consequently, it could not be he was thinking seriously of Lida Deane.

He was still looking at the cabin when he saw two men emerge from the cover of the rocks and approach it. This would not have been an important matter had he not recognized them, but one glance was enough to show that they were the same men who had assaulted Lida the night he came to her rescue—Gravel Joe and his partner.

The discovery made Hank look at them still more keenly, and his suspicions increased. The manner of the man was secret, stealthy and ominous, and he was not long in suspecting they had no good purpose in going there.

"More rascality afoot! Wonder if they think she is there, and have got abduction on the brain?"

Almost unconsciously, he loosened one of his revolvers and looked at its condition. Then he again gave his whole attention to the men.

Once or twice they stopped where they were partially concealed by rocks, and he suspected their object was to learn if Lida was at home. This matter seemed settled finally, for they

ceased skulking and moved boldly forward toward the door.

Horseshoe Hank still watched, and he began to have a dim idea that it was fortunate he was there.

The roughs reached the door and knocked. There was no answer to their summons. Twice it was repeated, and then they tried the door, but it proved to be secured in some way.

Then, for a moment, they stood still, talking earnestly, after which they went around to the end of the cabin and stopped before the window. Gravel Joe laid hold of it and it slid up without any trouble. He looked inside, hesitated for a moment, and then threw one leg over the casing and drew his heavy body after it. His partner followed suit and both were beyond Hank's view.

"This is a pretty state of affairs," the latter muttered, "and I feel that I have a call to chip in. Those fellows are enemies of Miss Deane, and at the very least, their object must be burglary. How much worse it may be I can't say, but I think I'll drop on 'em and see what they are about."

Without any delay he strode toward the cabin, and at the end of three minutes he stood by the window. The roughs had left it open and he looked inside.

They were not visible, but he saw another door ajar and heard their voices from a second room.

Horseshoe Hank was not the man to hesitate before odds of two to one, and he coolly slipped through the window and, drawing his revolvers, proceeded to the inner door. His last movements were cautiously made, as he wanted to see what the other men were doing before revealing himself.

Looking through the door he saw them. They were standing together and looking about the room.

"I'll be durned ef I know whar we are goin' ter put it," Gravel Joe was saying. "Ez you obsarve, ef we fill a tumbler with water an' put in thar she is sure ter chuck ther hull business away. Whar shall we put it?"

"Durned ef I know," answered Zeke Bunce.

"Tain't goin' ter be easy."

"Wal, I should say not."

"I have it!" Joe suddenly exclaimed.

"Wal?"

"We'll put it in the tea-pot, an' that'll lay out both her an' ther nigger. Hi! that is jest ther idee. Bring ther tea-pot this way."

Zeke proceeded to obey, while Gravel Joe took from his pocket a paper which he carefully unfolded. Hank could see that it contained a grayish powder, and he felt mingled horror and indignation at what he thought proof that the men intended to poison the girl they had failed to injure on the former occasion. Unless he erred, the powder was arsenic.

The tea-pot was opened and Joe raised the paper, but just then a sharp voice sounded behind him.

"Drop it!"

Gravel Joe did drop it; not because he voluntarily obeyed, but because when the voice thus broke the silence he gave a startled bound, and the paper and its contents went flying to the ground. Nothing short of a broom could recover the powder for him.

But this was not the worst. As he wheeled he saw the man who had spoken, and the sight of the two revolvers bearing on him and Zeke Bunce did not tend to allay his fears.

Worst of all, the man who had thus come upon them was the same sport whom he already had cause to cordially hate.

"Quite right, Joseph," coolly commented Hank. "Your prompt obedience is gratifying, and now—Hold on! my dear sir, hold on! Keep your hand away from your revolver or I'll be obliged to perforate you!"

Gravel Joe uttered an oath and his hand fell to his side. He had hoped to get in his work before the horseshoe sport detected his purpose, but he found he was not dealing with a child, and his little game failed. He was practically helpless in the hands of this young dandy who held the drop with a smile on his face, but with a latent resolution just visible which told that he would not bear any child's play.

"Curse you! what do you mean?" blustered the rough, taking the only course open to him.

"Well, I thought I made my interjections plain, but if I didn't, I'll repeat that I am the upper dog in this tussle, and that I'll chew your ear off if you don't look wild. Keep away from your sixes, or there'll be a funeral in the Gravel family."

"I mean, how dare you come here—"

"Well, it is risky crawling in through a window, but I saw you travel the same road, and it struck me I ought to be able to follow."

"You'll wake up dead some mornin' ef you don't let up meddlin' with me," viciously growled the rough.

"Now you tickle me. There is a grim facetiousness about your remarks which makes me sneeze. About what year do you propose to climb me?"

"Jeer on, my fine gamecock, but don't flatter yourself the day of judgment isn't comin'."

I'm Gravel Joe, an' I'm a snorter on ther half-shell. Nobody kin walk over my feet an' live to see ther harvest. This ain't ther fust time you hev lipped in when you wa'n't asked, an' I give yer fa'r warnin' it means death ter try it ag'in."

"Strikes me you have made these remarks before. Better have them printed, and then present a copy to each of your victims just before chewing them up. It will be a saving of breath."

Gravel Joe was so mad with wrath that he felt like a man strangling. Never before had he seen a person who could irritate him as the sport did. Indeed, he had found but few men whodared stand up before him and say anything, anyway; but Horseshoe Hank had a way of first catching hold of the winning cards, as it were, and then cutting a man to the quick by sarcastic words.

"Give me a show an' we'll settle this!" said the rough, grating his teeth.

"Oh! if you want to go into the show business, you must apply to some agency; I can't set you up. Now, see here, my fine fellow, let us come down to business. Are you aware that poisoning is an offense, even in Idaho? If I hadn't dropped in and stopped the racket you would have had a first-class murder on your record; and that's a thing Judge Lynch anted up a rope for when he gets the cue."

"What do you mean? I hain't killed nobody."

"No; the poison is on the floor."

"That wa'n't p'izon."

"It was arsenic."

"You're a liar! It wa'n't anything o' ther kind."

"Why were you going to put it in the teapot?"

"That's my business."

"You'll find it is the business of more than yourself, my fine cut-throat. You have been caught in the act, and you have got to answer for it to a proper tribunal. If there is a shadow of law at Stonewall Bend, you shall get it with a vengeance!"

"Now, hole on!" exclaimed Gravel Joe, his face working with mingled fear and anger. "I hev never did you no harm, an' you ain't no call ter chip in hyar, but if you do chip in, me an' you is enemies ter ther death arter this. You wear a boss'shoe on yer hat, an' call yerself ther Man o' Big Luck, but you'll find yer luck will go out like a taller candle ef I once git arter you in 'arrest."

"Any time the spirit moves you, Joseph, you can sail right in, but I warn you I am a few on the shoot, and if you play mad-dog, I'll play the red slayer. Keep your distance or you'll get hurt."

Hank spoke with the utmost coolness. He was one of the few men who, having the "drop," are able to keep it in a commendable way, but that he was one of the few the roughs were disagreeably aware.

"Oh! cuss your mule-head!" cried Gravel Joe, with a groan, "won't you never know nothin'? Why can't you keep out of other folks' affairs? I ain't done nothing ter you; why do you bound me like this?"

"Because you are an arrant rascal, old man. A fellow who would try to poison two people, and one of them a girl, deserves to stretch hemp, and I am going to do my share to hang you. You must go to the village as my prisoners."

"Let me have a voice in the matter!"

The words were spoken in a new voice, and from a point near the front door.

CHAPTER XIII.

ADDITIONAL PERPLEXITIES OCCUR.

GRAVEL JOE and Zeke Bunce turned quickly toward the last speaker, but the Man of Big Luck recognized the voice and walked backward to a position where he could see her and, at the same time, watch the roughs.

It was Lida Deane who had thus arrived on the scene.

She stood near the door, as calm and self-possessed as though these intruders on her premises had been invited guests, while close behind her stood Goliath, his huge frame looming up like a colossal statue, an idea favored by his stoical face.

"Naturally," added the girl, as no one spoke, "I want something to say concerning matters which seem to concern me."

"I opine they do, miss," Horseshoe Hank answered. "These fellows have tried to poison you, and—"

"It's a lie!" broke in Gravel Joe, hotly. "Nobody ain't tried ter p'izon ye; leastwise, we ain't. This galoot is a durned liar, fur we was only jokin'."

"You're the mightiest man on the joke I ever set eyes on!" said the sport, with cool sarcasm. "When arsenic, revolvers and dynamite get to be jokes, what will be classed as things of dead-earnest? Look on the floor, miss, and you may see the powder I caught these fellows trying to put in your tea. I take it the stuff would eclipse patent medicine for viciousness every time."

"Oh! you give me a fair chance, and I'll

make you sick!" almost bawled Gravel Joe, who was plainly a good deal frightened.

"You've had your 'chance' and lost it, as people usually do in lotteries, Joseph, but I shall tie up at the Bend for some days to come, and if you hanker for scalp, all you've got to do is to take it. I'll keep the latch-string always out."

"Be so good as to let this matter rest for now," said Lida. "You, Gravel Joe, need not take the trouble to make any more denials. I have once had a sample of your way and am prepared to believe anything against you. Still, you need not be afraid, for I shall not press the charge against you. You are free to go at any time; the sooner, the better."

The faces of the roughs brightened; that of Hank fell.

"But you don't understand, miss—" he began; but the girl made a quick gesture and interrupted him.

"I think I understand fully," she said. "These men tried to poison me. Enough; let it go so."

"And you give them permission to go?"

"Yes."

"Well, I don't!" stubbornly answered the Man of Big Luck. "Such creatures are not safe to have around town, and I am going to keep my word and run them in."

"I beg that you will not, sir. You say you are my friend. Prove it by letting them go."

Hank looked at the girl in perplexity. He could not see a fit reason for such clemency, and it looked like the hight of folly to him. Still, she had made her argument in such a way that he could not very well refuse.

"Well," he reluctantly said, "you are mistress here, and what you say goes as it lays. I throw up the sponge and retire from the ring."

"Please remain awhile."

Hank had merely spoken in a figurative sense, and he did not refuse the invitation. The presence of Lida had a sort of fascination for him, and he announced that he was at her service.

Lida and Goliath moved aside, and then the former looked at the roughs, and stretched one hand out toward the door.

"Go!" she said, steadily.

Standing not on the order of their going, they went, and their faces showed that they were glad enough to do so. They merely gave one speaking look at Hank—a look which told of implacable hatred—and then slouched from the cabin. Goliath followed to the door to see that they did not linger to do any mischief; but their defeat was so evident that they did not try to turn the tables, but got away from the vicinity with all convenient speed.

Lida turned to Hank with a gentle smile radically different from her late coldness.

"Once more, sir, I owe you thanks," she said.

"I don't feel that I deserve any, since those cut-throats have gone free," he frankly answered.

"I am sorry we disagree on that point; but I have reasons for my course of which you know nothing."

"That may be; but, in my opinion, there can be no reason for overlooking an attempt at murder."

"You don't know all."

This was so thoroughly a woman's answer that the sport did not try to comment upon it. He clearly saw that Miss Deane did not intend to confide in him; but it was her right to speak or remain silent, and he did not intend to deny that right nor seek to overthrow it.

After a moment's pause she asked for a full account of what had occurred during her absence, and Hank gave it without any attempt to hide what he believed to be the truth.

"I am not greatly surprised," she said. "When I came to Stonewall Bend I knew I would meet with a stout resistance, and though I scarcely expected any enemies would attempt murder, I suppose I ought to have known they would."

"You don't seem frightened."

"I am not."

"Yet, I judge the chances are against you."

"How so?"

"The odds of numbers and strength."

"True. I have only Goliath."

Hank turned his gaze on the mulatto. The giant had ceased to look from the door and was watching his young mistress stoically. His broad face showed only composure, and a casual observer might have taken him for little more than a block or stone. Hank, however, noticed that his features, which were as regular as those of any man should be, were intelligent and indicative of latent strength.

So the Man of Big Luck suspected Goliath was quick-witted enough, and that he would fight to the last extremity for his young mistress.

"No small resource," said the sport, answering Lida's last remark; "but you cannot hope to fight a town, and I suspect you will yet have all the Bend against you. Gravel Joe will most probably stir up the worst element, and if you have an enemy among the so-called better class, you stand a poor chance."

"I have thought of all this long before—before I ever saw you," she quickly answered.

"Oh, very well; if I am only retailing stale information, I may as well put on my boots and go," said the sport, more piqued than even his curt speech indicated.

He turned away as he spoke, but Lida uttered his name.

"I wish to mention another matter," she added. "What is this about the disappearance of Ross Gilmore? Have you any theory in regard to the matter?"

"Nothing definite," the Man of Big Luck answered.

"I know no more about the matter than what is currently reported, but as I hear you are working for the new owner of the Golden Brick, I wish to say Parker Clifton is not above suspicion."

"Ah! do you know—"

"I told you I knew nothing. All that I do know is what Clifton's character is. It would not surprise me to know that he was a party to Gilmore's flight, and the chief gainer thereby; but I cannot give you an iota of proof. Indeed, I may be wholly wrong. I merely tell you Clifton, rich man though he is, is not above the most contemptible trickery, and you can use this suggestion, though not my name, in working up the case."

"Very much obliged to you for the hint, miss, and in return, let me say that if you ever need a friend you have only to call on me. I hope we part friends?"

"We certainly do, so far as I am concerned. You have twice done me a favor which words cannot over-estimate, and I trust I am not one to be ungrateful, though circumstances compel me to withhold full explanation."

She extended her hand frankly, and after an earnest pressure, he took his departure in a better frame of mind than he had possessed a short time before.

As he walked toward the village his mind was resting more on the girl than on the Gilmore case. The more he saw her the more he was impressed, and he arrived at a conclusion many a man has formed before him.

"If she didn't see fit to throw such a confounded air of mystery about herself, she would be a very agreeable companion."

He was thinking of her too intently to pay due attention to what was transpiring, or might transpire, around him, and he was brought to a realization of his lack of prudence as a coil of rope—the well-known noose of a lasso—settled about his neck, and he was jerked roughly from his feet to the ground.

Quick to think and act, he knew the value of prompt action then, and with almost incredible celerity he bounded to his feet, at the same time drawing his revolvers.

He was not surprised at what he saw.

A few feet away were Gravel Joe and Zeke Bunce. They had been properly gathering in on the lasso, but his quick recovery had slackened the rope, and without stopping to cast it off, which might have given them time to draw other weapons, he thrust his left foot forward where he could brace it against a rock, and at the same time brought his revolvers to bear on the roughs.

"Halt, there!" he exclaimed. "I'll shoot the first man who tries to tighten the rope!"

There was a stern ring of resolution in his voice, and the muzzles of his revolvers bore on the evil pair in a way not to be disregarded. Gravel Joe dropped the lasso and broke into a torrent of oaths.

"You see you are in for it again," said Hank, coolly. "You might as well kick against a rock as me. I tell you I am the Man of Big Luck, and it takes a galoot with cowhide boots to get the drop on me. No half-soled cobbler need apply."

"I'll be square with you yet!" hissed Gravel Joe.

"Oh! I suppose you think I am going to let you canter around promiscuously, and take a shot at me whenever you see fit, not to mention other deviltry. That's where you're mighty mistaken, Joseph; you've had three raps at me and gone out on strikes; and now I'm going to take my inning—and my revenge!"

CHAPTER XIV.

HORSESHOE HANK ADMINISTERS THE ROD OF CORRECTION.

GRAVEL JOE's face showed that he had a lively fear that the sport meant business. Rough and bully though he was he experienced all the fluctuations of mind a novice would feel, and though he could talk loudly when it appeared safe, he had a way of "wilting" when the red flag of danger waved in his track.

Just at that moment he had no doubt but Hank meant to shoot to kill, and he flung up his hands with marvelous quickness.

"Hold on! hold on!" he implored; "don't you see I am unarmed?"

"I see you are a cowardly hound, but that won't help you out of your fix. You've had your dance, and now the fiddler must be paid."

As Hank spoke he flung one of his revolvers up and fired. The lasso parted as from the stroke of a knife; he had shot it in two.

"The rest I'll keep for a badge," he coolly observed. "Zeke Bunce, I'll trouble you to

throw your weapons on the ground. If you turn one of them on me in so doing, I'll shoot you off-hand. Comprehend?"

Zeke did comprehend, and as he was not the man to scorn his own safety, he obeyed with promptness, if not with a cheerful air. His weapons were cast on the ground.

"Now," added Hank, "relieve your friend in like manner."

"Look-a-hyar!" exclaimed Joe, his eyes rolling with restless uneasiness, "what be you goin' ter do?"

"Time will show; wait till the clouds roll by, Joseph. You did not consult me before tossing the lasso, and I must now claim the same right in putting my moral show on the boards. Mr. Bunce, do I see you moving?"

Zeke started and proceeded to obey. Gravel Joe, standing with his hands well up, glared at him fiercely.

"Turn ther barkers on that galoot when yer git them!" he said, in a subdued voice.

"Don't you do it, old man," quickly answered Hank, who seemed to have extraordinary faculties of hearing. "I hold the drop, as you perceive, and I'll blaze away if you make a hostile movement."

"I hain't goin' ter make none," said Zeke, hastily, "I know when I'm down. Keep yer shooters turned t'other way, pard, fur ther Lord's sake. Down go ther sixes!"

He suited the action to the word and Joe stood as helpless as his companion in evil-doing.

"Now, then," resumed the Man of Big Luck, "I'll trouble you to take this lasso and bind your chum to yonder tree, with his face to the bark, first removing his coat."

Gravel Joe's face was a panorama of expressions, for he did not know what this order prefaced. Knowing, in a vivid, if not sympathetic, manner what he deserved, he feared fresh trouble was afoot, but in any case he was powerless to avert the storm and it was just as well to say nothing and try to secure clemency by going light.

So, he kept utter silence as Zeke bound him as directed. The lasso was passed around both his waist and the trunk of the tree, and firmly tied, and then his arms were extended as though he was embracing the tree, and what of it he could not span was managed by a piece of rope which extended from wrist to wrist.

Thus secured, he was as helpless as a child.

"Now, then," added the sport, "I'll trouble you, Mr. Bunce, to cut half a dozen of those rods in yonder thicket. Get some which are of practical value."

Gravel Joe turned pale. He began to foresee what was in store for him. He opened his lips to speak, but closed them without saying a word. Zeke Bunce proceeded to cut the rods, but he did it with the slowness which told that his heart was not in the work. He, too, suspected what was coming. He thought of taking to his heels and cutting loose from friend and foe, but when he glanced at Hank he saw those terrible eyes watching with unceasing vigilance.

The rods were cut—slender, but tough, switches about three feet long—and he brought them to the sport as meekly as though he had been a veritable slave.

"Now, then," said Hank, sternly, "take one and lay it on to Joe's back. I don't know of a more suitable punishment for crimes like his than to be flogged. Lay on, Macduff Bunce, and see to it you put muscle in your arm. No sham business or I shall sit down on you."

"Don't you do it!" gasped Gravel Joe.

"No, no; I can't!" said Zeke.

"That's where you make a thundering mistake, old man. You can, and will, or I'll turn the barkers on you again. Come, now, no fooling; I mean business. Lay on!"

"I'll have yer life ef ye do, Zeke Bunce!" hissed Joe.

"And I'll have it if you don't, Zeke Bunce!" added Hank.

The minor villain's face was the picture of dismay; he knew not which way to turn, nor how to escape from the calamity of the hour. In fact he had a lively suspicion that no escape was possible. He rallied after a moment and began a most eloquent appeal, but he was unceremoniously cut short.

"You are wasting words," said the sport, coldly. "I never show pity where none is due, and you fellows deserve a good deal more than you are likely to get. You have a chance to go scot-free by giving your leader in villainy a lesson, and it all rests with you whether you do or not. For the last time, lay on, and see to it you don't make your blows love-pats!"

Zeke groaned aloud, but he raised the rod. The case was a dire necessity against which struggling was in vain, and as Joe's wrath certainly could not be more dangerous than that of the horseshoe sport, who had all along been able to cope with both of them and never turn a hair, Zeke decided to take what seemed the least of two evils.

The rod arose, whistled through the air and fell upon Joe's back. The fellow was protected by his flannel shirt, but it was thin and Zeke had struck with a force which made his partner start and curse with pain.

"Again!" said Horseshoe Hank, sternly. "Keep it up, and lay on with all your might! The undershirt is a wreck, but so is his character."

He turned the muzzle of one of his revolvers on Ezekiel as he spoke, and that fellow at once began to work with a will. In his personal fear he forgot that Gravel Joe was his friend, and the blows fell thick and fast, and with a force which would have left permanent marks on his back had it not been for the intervening thickness of flannel.

As it was the ruffian suffered both in body and in pride, but after the first outburst he closed his lips tightly and not a word passed them. The greater part of the time his eyes were closed, also; when he opened them it was to turn on Horseshoe Hank a look of ferocity and bitter hatred.

The latter did not overdo the matter. Deeply as the fellow had sinned, he had no desire to have the reputation of a torturer, and when he judged Joe had received sufficient punishment he signed to the rod-wielder to cease.

"We will let the matter rest here," he said, quietly, "and I hope all parties will have the good sense to call the account square and keep out of it hereafter. If you molest me further, Gravel Joe, look out! I am not a man of knife and revolver, nor do I aspire to shed human blood, but when I am visiting a town and minding my own business, I want to be let alone. You have overstepped the bounds of reason, and this is the result. Now, once and for all, let me alone in the future. If you do not, I'll take to the revolver. Good-day!"

The sport turned abruptly away and left the spot, not once looking back, but he left a veritable volcano behind him. Gravel Joe's back was smarting from his punishment, but it was nothing to the fury in his mind. Again and again while the rod was descending on his back he had vowed to have Horseshoe Hank's life, and he was not the man to let any obstacle intervene which he could remove.

The Man of Big Luck had made a bad enemy.

The latter had gone half-way to the village when he suddenly wheeled. Indifferent as he had seemed to what was going on behind him, he had secretly watched, and as he turned he saw Zeke Bunce advancing with long strides.

The rough flung up his hands quickly.

"Hold on!" he said hastily. "I ain't on the war-path."

"Well, what's the matter with you?"

"I wanted ter notify you I'm goin' ter git outer Stonewall Bend on ther gallop. Thar ain't no show fur me arter what hez occurred; Gravel Joe would pufforate me like a sieve, he would. Tharfore you had better send a man ter ontie him—I won't!"

"Do you desert your friend like that?"

"Bet yer boots I do! I know Joe's way and don't want none o' it. He an' me is out, an' ez I said, I'm goin' ter skip out o' ther Bend in a shake and a half."

"Are you in earnest?"

"Every time."

The sport looked at his companion keenly and saw no reason to doubt that he was telling the truth.

"Well, since you are going, perhaps you will explain why you have hounded Lida Deane as you have?"

"I can't, fur I don't know nothin' about it; Gravel Joe hez been ther leader, an' I've been in ther dark. I kin only say that somebody is anxious ter have her abductionized an' took away from ther Bend. Joe comes ter me one day an' sez ez much, an' that ther job would not us a cool hund'ed each, but he wouldn't say who was ther man ahind ther scenes."

"No? Well, you agreed?"

"Yas; an' we tried ter kidnap her ther night you fust dropped on us. You know ther result."

"And then you tried to poison her?"

"No, no; that powder wa'n't arsenic, ez you thought—or at least, Joe said it wa'n't. 'Twar only a sleepin' powder, by which we hoped ter git her away. We had two hosses up in Thistle Gulch, which we was goin' ter use when we got her. They is thar now, an' I'm goin' ter take one an' scoot. I only came hyar now ter ask you ter see Gravel Joe free; I ain't goin' ter git my head chawed off."

Bunce was evidently telling the truth, and Hank urged him no further. He promised to see Gravel Joe freed, and then Zeke turned his back on the town and strode away.

"So the thieves are falling out," muttered the sport. "Well, that don't help me materially, for Joe will easily find another pard, and then, no doubt, he'll be after me for revenge like a cyclone. I must look a little out; so must Lida Deane, for whether her enemy be Clifton or some one else, he means her mischief. I'm sorry, but I'll watch a little for her, since I've only a dozen or so games to play."

CHAPTER XV.

AT MIRA GARRETT'S CABIN.

HORSESHOE HANK returned to the village without any definite object in view, but with his mind so busy that he went without any perceptible effort on his part, and it was not until

he saw a well-remembered cabin before him, that he aroused from meditation.

It was the one in which lived Mira Garrett. He paused abruptly and looked closely at it. The smoke was slowly curling upward from the chimney, but the girl was invisible. Should he enter? He mutely asked the question, but it was one not so easily answered. His mind was unsettled so far as Mira was concerned. At times he assured himself he no longer cared for her; anon, he had unmistakable proof that the old love was not yet dead. Again, he could at times think of the past with indifference, only to feel, a little later, a strong desire to be avenged on the man who had supplanted him, and a desire to humble the girl for wrecking his life.

Just then he felt like arraigning her, but he hesitated.

Several minutes passed before he stirred from his position, and when he did his mind was by no means settled. He did what was the least commendable.

Walking to the side of the cabin he looked through the window, not secretly, yet with a desire to escape notice.

Mira was there and alone. She sat by the table and was reading a letter she held in her hand. Others lay on the table. Her back was toward Hank and he could neither read her face nor see the writing on the white page, but he felt a thrill of jealousy.

Were the letters from his favored rival—from Ross Gilmore?

Had he been in the room he would not have hesitated to possess himself of one of them, but there was no way to enter unseen and unheard by her.

He meditated further and arrived at a decision. There would be no better occasion for a talk with her, and, in some way, he might manage to secure one of the letters. At any rate, he would seek to gain admission.

He was turning away when he saw another man approaching the cabin. It was Parker Clifton. Hank recognized the fact that he, too, intended to visit Mira, and, yielding to a sudden impulse, he pressed against the side of the cabin wall, to avoid notice, and resolved to see and hear what he could.

Clifton rapped, and Mira hurriedly sprung to her feet. The letter which she had just finished reading she flung into the fire; the others she stowed away in her pocket.

The applicant twice repeated his summons before it was answered. By that time the letter was in ashes, and the girl walked deliberately to the outer door, her face composed, but wearing the defiant look Horseshoe Hank had before seen upon it.

Taking advantage of the chance he raised the window an inch at the bottom, leaving an opening through which he believed he could overhear what was said inside, and then took the most favorable position.

Mira opened the door and stood face to face with the great man of the Bend.

She looked defiantly, but he did not seem in the least affected. He had faced more belligerent people in his day than a meek girl could very well be; and his own expression was perfectly bland and friendly.

"Good-morning, Miss Garrett," he said. "I have come to see you on business."

"Well, I am here," she curtly answered.

"So I see, and, with your permission, I will enter."

He proceeded to carry out his idea as coolly as though cordially invited in, and as she made way he walked to a chair and sat down with his face turned away from the spy at the window.

"Please be seated, Miss Garrett," he added. "Our conversation may be too lengthy for the labor of standing."

She silently obeyed. Horseshoe Hank had rather expected to discover that they were allies, but, unless they were acting a pre-arranged part, such was not the case. Mira's expression remained hostile.

"I will come to business at once," continued Clifton, easily. "I wish to speak of Ross Gilmore."

"Good heavens! is every one in Stonewall Bend coming here to question me concerning a man of whom I know nothing?" the girl sharply demanded.

"I don't know why they should; it is only those personally interested in his disappearance who are likely to seek you."

"What have I to do with him, anyway?"

"You ought to know better than any one else, but the opinion is current that you are his wife."

"Rubbish! I know nothing about the man."

"Then why did he visit you?"

"He did not visit me!"

"Pardon me, Miss Garrett, but two witnesses of unimpeachable veracity saw him call here the evening of his strange disappearance."

"Well, what of it?" sullenly demanded the girl.

"Simply this: it leads us to suppose you may know where he now is," blandly replied Clifton.

"Well, I don't."

"I beg that you will not speak so sharply, nor regard me as an enemy. I have been Gilmore's friend; I have helped him from obscurity and poverty to wealth; and though matters now look unfavorable to him, I am still his friend and willing to help him. Granting that he has gone away with the ten thousand dollars belonging to me, I am willing to allow it as a youthful indiscretion and save him from all trouble."

"You are a wily old rat!" was Miss Garrett's rather inelegant exclamation.

"Indeed! What do you mean?"

"Simply that you know a good deal more about the disappearance of your partner than I do."

"I? I know nothing. Please explain."

"Don't imagine I am the only one who is suspected in this case. There are people who see in the simultaneous disappearance of money, deed and man a chance for Parker Clifton to be the chief gainer. Don't imagine people are blind!"

Horseshoe Hank felt like chuckling. Mira was giving blow for blow, and he wished he could see Clifton's face.

"You speak in riddles," the latter answered, not a shade of annoyance in his voice.

"Perhaps Amos Buckley will yet speak plainly."

"Do you mean that I was a party to Gilmore's flight?"

"I make no charges; I leave that to those who may care to prove what they allege."

Clifton laughed lightly.

"According to your theory, we are both doomed to have unenviable reputations. Are people going to say that Miss Garrett, Ross Gilmore and Parker Clifton were co-partners in a plot to do—well, what were we trying to do?"

"I was trying to do nothing, but you had better beware that men don't say you sold the Golden Brick in such a way that you could pocket the money, but hold the mine."

"Ah! I now comprehend," said Clifton, whose seeming slowness to do so betrayed the fact to Hank that he must have seen long before he acknowledged it. "Yet, you are wholly wrong, young lady, and I cannot believe men will judge me so harshly. I do not know where Ross is, nor why he has gone away. Can you say as much? Come, Miss Garrett, be frank. Tell me what you know about our mutual friend, and I pledge my word I will not bring harm on you or him."

"I know nothing."

"Miss Garrett?"

"Well?"

"Do not throw away this chance to make a friend. I have power in Stonewall Bend, and I will not see harm come to those in whom I am interested. Confide in me, and I will help you all I can."

He spoke earnestly, and Horseshoe Hank looked keenly at Mira. Accustomed as he was to reading her face he could not fail to read it then; even a novice might have done it; and he saw that she wavered. Doubt, irresolution, uncertainty and an inclination to speak were outlined there, and the spy would almost have been willing to stake his life she could have revealed the mystery of Ross Gilmore's disappearance had she seen fit.

But she did not.

"I do not know why you talk such nonsense," she said, the hard look returning to her face. "Do you expect me to tell a lie for the sake of gaining your proffered friendship? I will not do it. Once and for all, Ross Gilmore is nothing to me, and I do not know where he is."

Clifton's face became stern.

"Mad girl! do you, then, reject my offer wholly?"

"I do, sir."

"So be it then, but do not blame me if the consequences are unpleasant. Let me tell you what I really know. You and Ross Gilmore have played your cards well here at the Bend, but you cannot erase the past. Let me tell you what I know. A trifle more than a year ago you were living in Colorado, and was the affianced of a cattle-king named Latham. He expected to call you his wife, but, just before the wedding-day, you vanished. Where had you gone? I will tell you. You had run away with another and more favored lover; in brief, with Ross Gilmore!"

The speaker had two most attentive listeners. Horseshoe Hank, filled with wonder as to how Clifton had learned this fact, watched and listened eagerly.

Mira's face again became a panorama, but the predominating expressions were fear, surprise and consternation. Underlying these was the old look of defiance which told that she would not long listen tamely. Indeed, she recovered her self-possession quicker than one could expect.

"You are a fine romancer!" she sneered.

"Bah! You would deny that black was black, and insist that it was white," said Clifton, in disgust. "Yet, do not imagine I am going to humor you; I am done with that. My motive now is to show you I know more than you thought. As I have said, you proved false

to your vows, and deserted Latham the evening before you were to have become his wife. You fled with Ross Gilmore. This was in July, 1882. A month later Gilmore appeared here and sought work with me. I gave it, and, as I have said, raised him from poverty to comparative wealth. He was base enough to make love to my daughter, even while continuing his relation toward you—I do not know whether it was husband or lover—and, since you have rejected my offer of friendship, I intend to deal with him as I have found him. Deceiver of my daughter and thief of my money, I will hunt him down as I would a mad-dog. Woman, I will see that your lover goes behind prison bars for a good twenty years!"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE PAST AND THE PRESENT.

CLIFTON did not once raise his voice above its usual pitch, but it had a steel-like, relentless ring which told that he was fully in earnest, and that he would make a bad enemy for any one, man or woman.

Horseshoe Hank expected that Mira would quail before his threat, but she seemed, if anything, to grow more at ease. As he ceased speaking, she laughed lightly.

"You are at liberty to do what you choose. I do not care a picayune what becomes of Ross Gilmore."

"Have you then broken with him?"

"There was nothing to break. He was never anything to me, nor do I care what becomes of him. I never fled with him, as you assert; I do not even know the man."

Clifton abruptly arose.

"Enough!" he said, harshly. "I am a fool to try to reason with an obstinate woman; it is time thrown away. You are free to proceed as you see fit, and I will do the same. Yet, let me say one word to you: in the future, do not come to me to ask for mercy. I will show none to you, nor to Ross Gilmore. Fix this fact firmly in your mind."

"Thank you for nothing! Don't get the notion into your head that I shall ask you to melt to pity, for I can see just what an old flint you are. I hope you're satisfied with this visit, though I can't see why you want to drag me in, unless it be as a cover for your own game. Do you aspire to make me the beast of burden upon whom to shift your own sins? If so, look out, for I warn you I won't be trampled upon!"

"You are a fool!"

"Birds of a feather flock together."

Clifton did not answer this retort, but, without another word, strode to the door and out of the cabin. If his face was a criterion, he was supremely disgusted, and the laugh which followed him did not add to his placidity.

Mira closed the door, and as Hank saw her about to replace the bar he made a sudden resolution, shoved up the window and slipped lightly inside.

The girl finished securing the door and turned about with a sneering smile still on her face, but it vanished at sight of the man whom she thus confronted.

The color retreated from her face even more perceptibly than during their last meeting, and she retreated several steps and stood with one hand pressed against the wall and the other over her heart.

Hardened as she had become during the year, she feared this man more than all the rest of the world's people.

"Hank!" she gasped, faintly.

"That's my name," said the Man of Big Luck, coolly. "Hank Latham, that was; Horseshoe Hank, that is. Why?"

His question seemed a trifle indefinite, nor did she try to answer it. She stood in silence, but her gaze was fixed on him as she would look at a tiger she expected to spring upon her.

"I've heard what Parker Clifton had to say to you," he continued, "and I must say he made a reasonable offer. You should have accepted."

"You and he have both lied!" she burst forth vehemently.

"I? On the contrary, I have said nothing, one way or the other."

"You have told him about—about the old Colorado days."

"Wrong. I have told him nothing."

"Then, who has?"

"Now you stump me. I have no more idea than the man in the moon—a new expression, to which I have a copyright. I certainly have no desire to trumpet that little episode about for the benefit of the world; it would not give glory to such a man as Horseshoe Hank, the Man of Big Luck. No. Whatever Clifton knows he picked up elsewhere, and I even doubt if he suspects I am the unlucky Latham of whom he spoke. I have taken on a new style since that day, as you may see, and even Red Jim and the other cowboys would have to look several times at me to-day before they would recognize King Latham."

For a moment, as he spoke of the past, Hank forgot the dark page in his life and looked at Mira with friendly eyes. She was the only woman he had ever loved, and for her he had felt an affection which sea nor land could compass.

The Colorado prairie seemed to lie spread before him once more—

It was a dangerous picture to contemplate, and he tore himself away, as it were. The woman had deceived him, and now there could be only enmity between them.

"You seem proud of the change," said Mira.

"Am I? That's news, but it strikes me I am better off than then. So far as I know, no one is now pulling the wool over my eyes."

She winced a little at the blunt speech.

"I don't think it was any great loss to you."

"Nor do I," he frankly answered. "I don't object in the least; I wish Gilmore joy."

She looked at him closely but did not answer.

"One thing I do wish to mention," he added.

"Well?"

"From the moment your old uncle knew what had happened, he became a mental wreck. His brain gave 'way; he never spoke coherently to any one. Even now, unless he is dead, he sits in a corner and constantly repeats one word: 'Gone! gone!' That refers to you, but it is a voice from the past. He no longer thinks or reasons; as I said before, he is a mental wreck, and whatever he is you made him."

"I did not intend it," she answered with a shiver.

"The knowledge of your perfidy ruined him."

"It don't seem to have affected you."

"Not a hair."

"Well, I am glad of that," said the girl; but there was an accent of pique in her voice, as though it would please her to know her quondam lover had suffered bitterly.

"Let us drop the subject. What of Gilmore? Has he finally deserted you?"

"He never had a chance to do so; he was never anything to me."

"Nonsense!"

"You doubt it?"

"I certainly do."

"Allow me to ask your reasons for thinking he was."

"Well, one of them is that you left several fragments of a letter behind you when you first fled. By means of one I learned it was to Stonewall Bend you had gone, and thus I found you. Another bore what I judged to be a fragment of a name. It was like this."

Hank lifted a piece of coal and, on the wall, marked the following fragment:

"—s G—."

"If that don't mean 'Ross Gilmore,' what is it?"

Mira did not answer at once; but the Man of Big Luck saw evidence of perturbation and felt sure he had struck the right trail.

"I await your answer," he added.

"And I have nothing to say."

"Oh! very well; I am rather glad, of the two, that you haven't. It indicates that Gilmore has used you well."

"Why are you in Stonewall Bend?" she abruptly asked.

"Hunting Gilmore," was the laconic answer.

"For what purpose?"

"Revenge!"

The sport suddenly stretched out one hand and his face was harsh and stern. All her fears returned, if her face spoke the truth; but he was shrewd enough to see it was not of herself she thought. She was still faithful to her love for his rival.

"Why do you blame him? Hadn't I a right to choose?"

"Beyond question, and had you come to me in a decent way when you had chosen, and told all, I would never have lifted a finger against you. But you fooled me to the last; you whispered love in my ears, with your head on my shoulder, even when preparing to flee with him, and I am not the man to forgive such a thing. I say I'm in Stonewall Bend for revenge, and so I am; revenge on him and on you."

The speaker struck his hand against his belt and his revolvers rattled together in a way which made Mira shiver again.

"Why do you blame him?" she asked.

"Well, I don't know that I have any cause," he said, with dry sarcasm; "but I do, just the same."

"I am the one for your anger to rest upon."

"Oh! rest easy; you come in for your share—and you'll get it. I'm into this game up to my neck, and I'll kick up a commotion before I get through which will astonish the natives. I object to being made a laughing-stock for any woman."

"He, at least, has escaped you."

"Oho! my lady, now you come down to business. He has escaped me. Good! that is equivalent to a confession that 'he' is Ross Gilmore!"

Mira bit her lips in seeming vexation, and the old, sullen look appeared on her face.

"I will say no more," she declared, "and I'll thank you to get away from here. No man who enters by a window can expect to be a welcome guest."

"Scarcely; but you see I don't care a red cent whether I am welcome or not. You and I no longer play the turtle doves, and Sambo gets his hoe-cake just the same whether you smile or frown. Enough said; I'll now bid you good-day and amble over to the hotel. I have

an engagement to meet Amos Buckley, whom I've promised that I'll find Gilmore."

"Will you sell yourself like that?"

"Why not?"

"You once called yourself a man of honor."

"That was when I thought women honorable."

Mira flushed; the retort was not to be misunderstood.

"And now you sell your services to Buckley?"

"As I observed before—yes. Miss Garrett, I am going to find Gilmore; I am going to bring him to justice; I will send him to prison for just as long as the law will allow. Why? Because he has ruined my life. I don't claim this is an honorable way, for it is open to sharp criticism; but you and he only have yourselves to thank. That's all I have to say. Good-day."

Horseshoe Hank lifted the bar, opened the door, and went out without another word. He expected Mira would call to him; but she did not, and he soon left the cabin behind.

"Good!" he thought, "I have light on the case at last, and now I'll proceed to find my man. Mr. Ross Gilmore appears as one of the most versatile rascals on record; but he shall find a stumbling-block in his way. I don't sail around with a golden horseshoe on my hat for nothing; I will show people I am the genuine Man of Big Luck. Now for Gilmore!"

CHAPTER XVII.

GILPIN'S CHASE.

WHEN Horseshoe Hank reached the hotel he found Buckley awaiting his arrival.

"Just in time," said the elder man. "I want your advice."

"Blaze away," said the sport, coolly, as he took a chair.

"It is about the Golden Brick. I am uncertain whether it is best to wait and see if Gilmore can be found, or to take immediate possession of the Golden Brick."

"Why not do the latter?"

"Clifton has asked me to wait until Gilmore's capture, in order that all may be 'regular,' as he expressed it. He gave several reasons, but they are all absurd, and I suspect he wishes a sufficient time to elapse so that my move for possession would look irregular. Then when I step in he would say he had received no money for the mine and inquire why, if I bought it, I had not taken possession before."

"You seem to think him a tough customer."

"Don't you?"

"Rather, I admit."

"Well, now, would you advise me to take possession?"

"Well, Amos, the case is just this size: If Clifton means mischief, his first move, when you took possession, would be to chuck you out again; and as there is no doubt but he can sway Stonewall Bend as he sees fit, it is pretty sure he would hold the mine."

"Then what am I to do?" gloomily asked Buckley. "I can't give up the Golden Brick. All I have in the world is invested there; its loss would leave me a beggar."

"If you sail under my flag, you are not going to lose it. I will tell you the way out. Either agree to Clifton's plan, and trust to luck that Gilmore and the deed will be recovered, or else send to Boise City and have fifty veteran miners come on here. Let them come secretly, and in the night-time, under your lead, take possession of the mine. This force, you see, will be *your* men, not Clifton's, and you can hold the Golden Brick."

Buckley caught eagerly at the suggestion, and more than ever he congratulated himself on having secured the aid of the Man of Big Luck. The measures taken to arrest Gilmore by having him intercepted had been suggested with care and shrewdness, and if matters worked as they ought, there seemed ground for hope.

By the time their conference was finished it was twilight, and Hank proceeded to make his supper.

This done, he went out to look for Dandelion Dan, who had been absent what seemed to be an unnecessary time. The sport looked to his revolvers before starting, for he knew Gravel Joe would be watching for a chance to square their account, and he did not intend the fellow should get the start of him. If he again drew his six, the shooting should be mutual.

The young man wandered on through the village without seeing any sign of Dan, and something impelled him to move toward the cabin of Lida Deane. He wanted to make sure she was safe, even though his offers of aid had been rejected. It was curious how often he thought of her, and just as odd that, after having avowed a want of faith in women, individually and collectively, he should have so high an opinion of her.

Curious? Odd? Well, in a certain degree; but we fancy Horseshoe Hank was not greatly different from the majority of men.

He approached the cabin from the east, advancing along an intermural stream called Gilpin's Chase. It was a swift-running current, which shot along between walls of rock, a dozen feet below the surface, and never more than ten wide.

In many places it could be easily leaped, but

when people did this it was with care, for no one had ever cared to take a bath in Gilpin's Chase. Such a thing might not prove fatal, but it was just as well not to try it.

On the brink of this miniature canyon the sport paused and, leaning on his rifle, looked down the hill to where the cabin was dimly visible. A light shone from the window of the largest room, and Hank judged all was well.

He fell into deep thought—too deep for his own good. With his senses wandering from the present he did not hear or see anything wrong, but danger seemed abroad. A human form was creeping toward him in a panther-like style. With its lithe sinewy body bent nearly to the ground it glided from rock to rock, at times invisible from where he stood; anon, raising its head to make sure he had not taken the alarm.

But the trouble might have been spared; the sport did not hear the almost noiseless advance.

Had he heard and seen, he would have discovered that this creeper was a Chinaman, which would have surprised him all the more because he had never seen one of the Orientals proceed in such a way.

But he saw nothing and the creeper wormed along in his serpentine style.

Nearer—nearer! He reached a point where he might have put out his hand and touched the American. Instead, however, he began gathering himself on his feet with the same wonderful caution before shown.

Horseshoe Hank heard nothing. His gaze was still fixed on the cabin. Perhaps he was thinking of Lida; perhaps other matters occupied his attention. At all events, he was fatally unconscious of what was going on around him.

The late creeper gained his feet and, delaying no longer flung his whole weight upon the sport pushing him with all possible force toward the miniature canyon.

No man, taken by surprise, could have resisted the shock thus given, and though Hank did succeed in turning a trifle, as though his predominating thought was to grapple with his enemy, he went over the edge of the raceway like a dead weight.

A heavy splash followed, and then the Chinaman stood alone on the brink of Gilpin's Chase. He laughed lightly and peered over the edge, but only the swift-moving water met his gaze. He did not look long. Previous knowledge of the place satisfied him there was no point upon which his victim could catch, and he knew he was even then shooting down the Chase, over rocks which would be as merciless as he who had sent the voyager to such a fate.

The Man of Big Luck seemed to have lost his "luck."

Only for a half-minute did the Chinaman linger on the spot; then he wheeled and moved away at a trot, his face toward the village.

He reached it without any encounter, but when he paused it was at the house of Parker Clifton. He had gone to a rear door, and a moment's fumbling was sufficient to remove the fastening. He entered and went at once to Clifton's private room. When he knocked a voice bade him enter; he obeyed, and stood in the presence of the master of the house and Ruford, the clerk.

"Well, Wah Ho!" questioned the elder man, at once.

The Oriental glanced at Ruford.

"Speak out," added Clifton. "Do not be afraid."

"Me do um," said Wah Ho, tersely.

"Ha! have you seen Horseshoe Hank?"

"Me said so."

"Where is he now?"

"Gone swimee."

"Gone swimming? Where?"

"In Gilpin Chase-ee."

"Do you mean you threw him in?"

"Me sayee so, an' me nebberr tell lie-ee. Me lookee for sport an' findee him stand on Chase-ee, lookee at stars likee foolish manee. Me creepee up blebind him an' chuckee in water. Him glo down like stone-ee, an' me s'pect him nebberr come upee."

"Bravo for you, Wah Ho! You have done better than I dared hope. But are you sure you got the right man? I never thought the Man of Big Luck was the person to get taken in by such a simple means."

"Me nebberr make mistakee. Eyes good; arms strong. Hankee git moonstruck an' no lookee out for bleakers; me creep up like catee, an' down he goee."

Clifton no longer hesitated; he knew Wah Ho of old, and knew him to be a somewhat remarkable man for one of his nationality; and he no longer had a doubt. Wah Ho said the sport had gone into Gilpin's Chase, and there was no reason to suspect him of double dealing.

He shook his hand, but his expression suddenly changed.

"But are you sure this ends the fellow? Is it sure death to fall into the Chase?"

"Rocks tear manee in plieces."

"But he might possibly shoot through all right—eh?"

"Chase-ee is big hole; no blottom; goee 'way down to bowels of earthee. Hankee nebberr come up."

"Beyond a doubt Wah Ho is right," said Ruford. "I've looked the Chase over a good bit myself, and it is a bad place. If a man survived the passage over the stones he would surely drop into the pit of which he speaks; and if that isn't bottomless it is, at least, an unknown place, and one I would not explore for a fortune. I think we can safely count Mr. H. Hank out of the way."

"Ha! ha!" laughed Clifton, "his golden horse-shoe did not prove so potent a charm as he expected."

"That is all nonsense, of course."

Wah Ho was dismissed, but not until Clifton had said that he should have the sum promised for the deed on the next day; and then the master of the house brought out a bottle of wine and he and Ruford drank to celebrate the late tragic event.

"I shall breathe freer now that that fellow is out of the way," added the rich man. "He was the most dangerous of those leagued against us. Buckley I can snap my fingers at, but this Hank belonged to that order of prying, thinking men, who are never safe companions while they live."

"You know I have never feared him," Ruford replied.

"You underrate him, as is natural to young men. I do not. I can see he is sharp and brave, and as he had taken sides with Buckley, he might have made matters warm for us before we could have brought matters to a focus."

"Well, he will never find the deed, anyway."

"No, and if Gilmore succeeds in keeping out of the way, there will be no trouble in my hanging on to the mine."

"Gilmore won't be caught; he is too sharp for that."

"Let us hope not. We are playing a bold game, and it is either sink or swim with us now, for—"

Clifton ceased speaking abruptly as a knock sounded at the door.

CHAPTER XVIII.

RUFORD'S COUNTERPLOT.

THE two men started a little, as plotters will when inopportune interrupted, but Clifton arose, after a little hesitation, and walked to the door.

He opened it and Stella crossed the threshold. She bowed to the clerk and then looked at her father.

"I knew you were here," she said, quietly, "and as I felt sure the interview referred to Ross, I have come to take part in it."

Clifton hesitated, but Ruford, who had arisen and stood with his gaze fixed on the fair face before him, spoke quickly:

"That is no more than right. No one is more interested in the matter than Miss Clifton, and though we are still dealing with mere theories, I am sure she is very welcome."

Toward the close of his remarks he fixed his gaze significantly on Clifton, and the elder man followed the suggestion mutely made.

"Certainly—of course," he answered. "There is no privacy about the matter, and you are quite welcome, my dear, if—if you can bear the opinion to which we have been forced."

"But not irrevocably formed," added Ruford, hastily.

Stella looked from one to the other searching.

"Do I understand by this that you are losing faith in Ross?" she asked, her voice trembling a little.

"We cannot close our eyes to the facts, my child, and they bear darkly on what we are obliged to imagine. Ross Gilmore is mysteriously missing, and with him went ten thousand dollars of my money and the deed of the Golden Brick. What are we to think if not that he has acted the thief?"

"I will never believe it, even though you do!" the girl said, with a vehemence which brought the color deeply into her cheeks. "I will not turn against Ross in the hour of his adversity. I persist in the opinion that he has met with foul play!"

"But, my dear, remember that when he left the office he was well armed, it was early evening and he had but a short distance to go. I do not see how harm could possibly come to him."

"I know that harm did come to him. He is no thief."

"A woman's argument, Stella; though, Heaven knows, one I wish could be proved true. But what of his visit to the girl, Mira Garrett? The cowboy who was here a week or two ago plainly stated to Ben Simmons that she ran away from Colorado with another man on the evening before she was to be married to a cattle-raiser named Latham, who has since vanished from human knowledge, having committed suicide, the cowboy believed. Well, just after Gilmore left the office, and when he should have come directly here, he visited Mira Garrett. He was seen to leave there safely, which proves he was acting of his own free will, but from that moment all trace of him is lost. Reluctant as I am to believe it, it looks as though he is the man with whom the Garrett girl fled from Colorado; that they have all the while been lovers—or even married—even when he was paying such

attention to you. Now Gilmore has fled, and, sooner or later, the girl will follow."

Ruford watched Stella closely while her father was speaking. He had reasons for wishing she might yield and think Ross Gilmore all evil, and he knew his own faith would never hold fast under such a test; but Stella's face did not lose its expression of sad firmness.

"I will never believe this until the proof is beyond question," she steadily answered.

"Good Heaven, girl! what more proof do you require?" Clifton irritably asked.

"There is none as yet. Circumstantial evidence is not proof."

"Miss Clifton is right, and, as I have always insisted, sir, Gilmore should have the benefit of every doubt," interpolated Ruford, respectfully.

Stella gave him a glance which caused him satisfaction he could hardly conceal.

"Good!" he thought; "I see my way out. I must champion the thief when with her, and that will turn her thoughts to me. When the case gets beyond the realm of uncertainty, she will despise Gilmore, and then I'll catch her heart in the rebound and make her Mrs. Ruford!"

Clifton observed that no one would be more pleased to see his partner establish his innocence than would he, and though he would not be so blind as to shut his eyes to what seemed to be the facts of the case, he would try to clear his name.

It was, however, impossible to do more than was already being done; men were searching for the missing man wherever it seemed likely he might have gone, but especially near Stonewall Bend, and he trusted all would end well.

Having made these remarks in an oily tone he dismissed his daughter, and Ruford was not long in going, also.

He left Clifton with a frown on his face.

"I'm not sure but this clerk is going to make himself disagreeable," he said, unconsciously speaking aloud. "He looked at Stella in a tender way, and advanced ideas he knew would please her. Jove! what if he should demand the girl as the price of silence?"

The plotter arose and paced the room restlessly, but he was not the man to long give way to such emotions.

"It is dangerous to have a confederate in crookedness," thought Clifton as he resumed his seat; "but if Ruford makes himself obnoxious, I reckon Wah Ho and I can dispose of him. Ha, ha! that Chinaman is a jewel; it's not every white man could have disposed of the Man of Big Luck. Wonder if I hadn't better set him on the track of the Deane girl, in place of that blundering fool, Gravel Joe!"

The following morning Amos Buckley walked into the saloon of the hotel and looked around for Horseshoe Hank. He was not present, but Dandelion Dan was dimly visible through a cloud of smoke he was sending out, engine-fashion, from a black pipe.

Buckley went to his side.

"Where is your pard?" he asked.

"Now you ketch me on a hip-lock, mister," the Dancing Daisy replied. "These hyar optics o' mine hain't rested on ther phizmahogany o' Hank sence last night."

"Don't you know where he is?"

"Nary know. I s'posed he was sleepin' ther sleep o' ther just, ez usual, but he hain't showed up, an' the chamberman says his bed hain't been teched durin' ther night."

"That is odd."

"What's odd?"

"That he hasn't been in. Do you think harm has come to him?" Buckley anxiously asked.

"Oh, go 'long! Harm come to H. Hank, Esquire? Not any. D'y'e mind ther golden horseshoe he wore on his hat? Wal, that is an amulet, metalisman, or whatsomdever you call it, an' no galoot kin lay him out while ther charm is at ther fore. Oh, you can't ketch ther Man o' Big Luck on ther hip—not any. Gravel Joe tried it, an' Hank jest balanced his pardner, an' set him ter cuttin' a pigeon-wing on ther half-shell."

"But where can he be?"

"Ez I obsarved afore, I dunno."

"It seems strange to me. I know of no other place where he would be likely to stay over night, and he promised me he would be here at eight o'clock—half an hour ago. I am afraid he has met with some misbar."

Dandelion Dan did not answer at once. He had less faith in the golden horseshoe than he pretended, and knew his partner was liable to danger like any one else, though his shrewdness usually served as a potent "charm." He remembered Hank's repeated encounters with Gravel Joe, and wondered if that ruffian had really succeeded in getting the advantage.

While the thought was in his mind the door swung open and Gravel Joe himself walked in. He moved slowly, as hebooved a man who had a tender back, and his general appearance was that of a badly demoralized man. He glanced around the room, and scowled at sight of Dandelion Dan, but without addressing him walked

to the bar and called for a drink of whisky, after which he took a seat.

Dan had watched him closely, and as the fellow sat down he arose and went to his side.

"Good-mornin', Joseph!"

"Good-mornin'," growled the rough.

"I waltzed over fur ter ask ye an interrogatory. Hev ye see'd Horseshoe Hank this a.m., or last night?"

Joe glared furiously at his companion.

"No, I ain't!" he growled.

"I was a-lookin' fur him, an' ez I know'd ye was a pussonial acquaintance o' his, I didn't know but ye might give me some information."

"I ain't his keeper," said Joe angrily.

"No?"

"No; an' don't ye come 'round hyar ter inquire. Mention his name ag'in an' I'll chuck ye out o' ther door."

"Go 'way; you must be a-jokin' now, G. J. You don't mean ye would take advantage o' my youth, small statoo an' inexperience fur ter do me bodily harm?"

"I say, go 'way, or I'll break you all ter pieces!"

"Now, you make me shake, old man. It is a way I hev when ther bugle o' war is blowed. But whar will ye ketch on? Which half will ye lick fust—east or west? Come right down ter biz, G. J., an' make yer argument plain."

The rough glared at the Dancing Daisy furiously. Knowing him to be Horseshoe Hank's partner, he would gladly have made good his boast, but he was not feeling just right for annihilating any border tribe, and Dandelion Dan had a noticeably large muscular development.

"I don't want no trouble," he observed, "but I'll break your durned head ef ye don't keep away!"

"Why in thunder didn't ye say so afore? Ef I'd known you wasn't glad ter see me I wouldn't hev been hangin' 'round hyar, but I had an idee that sech old chums as we was always glad ter ketch onther plow-handle an' harvest ther crop tergether. Hope you'll overlook my blunder an' remember me in yer will. So long!"

Dan went back to Buckley, but he left the rough with food for thought. Was Horseshoe Hank really missing? If so, he had come to grief through other means than his and Joe was sorry for it; he hated him, and he wanted the pleasure of putting him forever out of the sight of friend and foe.

"I reckon I'll open my eyes a bit and see ef I can't ketch onther critter. Ef he's alive, he's my mutton!"

CHAPTER XIX.

THE STRANGE WOMAN OF THE CAVE.

HAD Horseshoe Hank really perished in the swift waters of Gilpin's Chase? Let us follow him and see.

The attack had been so sudden that he was unable to even make a movement to save himself, but in falling he caught a glimpse of the man who had pushed him over and saw that it was a Chinaman. Then his view of the outside world ceased.

As we already know he had but a few feet to fall, and the shock of striking the water was insignificant, but the moment he did so the actual peril began. He was seized by the rapid current as though by gigantic hands and hurried along.

He flung out his arms and tried to find a hold for his hands, but the sides of the stream were worn perfectly smooth and he clutched in vain. Equally futile was his effort to combat the water and escape altogether; he was borne along as though he had been a feather.

Gilpin's Chase was not a long stream—at least, so far as its course above ground was concerned—and in an all too brief period he heard a roaring which reminded him that it was said to empty into a bottomless hole. He had never explored the place, but it had been described to him.

Once more he made a desperate effort to escape, but the suspense was soon over.

Suddenly he shot out into the air, as though projected from a spring-board, and then he felt himself falling through space, with a dull roaring sounding in his ears and spray dashing in his face.

The crisis was at hand!

Again he flung out his arms, seeking a hold, but he found only air and water, and his descent down the "bottomless hole" continued. Brave as he was he almost gave himself up for lost. Surely, there could be no hope.

Then came a shock and he was immersed in water—he shot beneath the surface—it attacked mouth and nostrils.

But it served to bring back all his coolness. The place was not bottomless, and he was an accomplished swimmer. Men are tenacious of life, and no sooner did the Man of Big Luck find himself in an element with which he was acquainted than he struck out manfully.

He arose to the surface, but met the outer edge of the sheet of falling water which, a little nearer the rock, descended with a dangerous fury. He made a few quick strokes to get away from it, but had gone but five or six feet

when he touched solid rock. He grasped blindly in the darkness, caught a point of rock and then drew himself up to firm footing.

The danger was over for the present, but what was ahead of him he had no means of knowing. The darkness was so intense that in no place was it broken; he could not even see his hand before him.

"Well, I'm out of the crush, but I'm not so sure I'm out of the bottomless pit. Unless Nature has benevolently fashioned a natural ladder, I can never ascend. The water takes up one side completely, and no jumping gazelle could climb it."

Even then he took the matter coolly, but it was because he possessed one of those buoyant natures that will philosophically endure what cannot be avoided. He had an unpleasant feeling that he was doomed to spend the remainder of his life where he was, but he did not intend to do it if he could get out.

His strength had been about exhausted when he reached the rock, but it soon returned, and with it came a desire for immediate action. He directed his gaze toward the rear, but nothing save darkness could be seen. He arose and moved in that direction, always finding firm footing beneath him, but taking care not to fall into any chasm which might break the level.

Nothing of the kind occurred for some time, and he went at least fifty yards without a change. Then the surface of the place abruptly descended in a sort of ledge.

For a moment he hesitated; there was no knowing what fresh dangers lay before him, and one misstep in the darkness might hurl him to instant death; but he decided, after a little thought, that it was best to press on and acted accordingly. He toiled down the ledge for at least a hundred feet, often finding his hold a precarious one, and then stood on a level surface once more.

"It's a great pity the place isn't lighted by electricity," he muttered, as he again paused.

"Wish I had previously called the attention of some capitalist to the fact—But I'll go on!"

He went, and soon found himself in a narrow passage not unlike the hall of a house. Feeling his way carefully, he had advanced a hundred feet when he suddenly paused.

"Hello! what's that? A light, as sure as I live! Now, then, in the name of all miracles, who burns oil in this forsaken cave of the earth?"

A light he had surely seen, not far in advance, and after a little hesitation he again advanced. He had no means of knowing who he would encounter, and in case of a fight he was ill-prepared for it. The revolvers in his belt were drenched with water; his knife was the only weapon upon which he could rely.

Still it was not his way to hold back, and he went on even more rapidly, and soon neared the light.

He saw it at last when he turned a point of rock; an ordinary kerosene lamp which set on a slab of rock and threw a dim light around upon the grim rocks which were scattered in profusion all around. But no human being was in sight; except for the lamp, there was nothing to show that any living creature had trod the subterranean place before him.

"Now, then, what if this should be Aladdin's lamp?" the sport muttered, with grim humor. "I believe the thing has been mislaid for some time, and it may have fallen to my lot to unearth it. If so, I will soon have a guide to lead me out. What! ho! genii and—"

The Man of Big Luck abruptly ceased as a hand was laid on his shoulder, and as suddenly wheeled, laying his hand on his knife as he did so.

He had expected to see some burly ruffian of the road-agent species, but what he did see was wholly different. Before him stood a woman; at least, it was a person who had the general appearance of being one, though he had never before looked on so strange and uncanny a species of the sex.

Evidently past middle-age, she had a tall and rugged form, to which the dress she wore gave an unnatural and exaggerated appearance. Black of color and coarse of fabric, it was made without a yard of superfluous cloth and, fitting closely to her figure, made her seem to Hank's astonished eyes at least seven feet in height, though, in point of fact, she was less than six.

Over her shoulders fell an abundance of straight, black hair, which also nearly covered her eyes, but enough of them was visible so that the sport saw that they glowed like those of a wild animal; and a face of ghostly whiteness served to complete the strange, weird picture.

Hank shrunk back as he would not have done from any man in Idaho, but he was given little time for thought. The woman spoke in a melancholy, even mournful, voice.

"Have you come to bring me news?" she asked.

The sport rallied.

"I reckon all she covets is a little gossip," he thought; but he took care to conceal this opinion and replied:

"Well, no; can't say I have. The last mail that arrived ain't in, yet."

"I mean, news of Locke."

"Oh! No, there is nothing new," Hank cautiously answered.

"It is strange he don't write."

"Maybe he's done so, and the letter has gone up Salt Creek."

"Where is that?" the woman asked.

"Where? Oh! it's—a—it's up in Oregon."

"And you haven't seen Locke?"

"No."

"I cannot imagine why he should desert his mother. Did he think I would desert him because the world spoke harshly of him? Could he believe that?"

"It isn't the way of mothers," Hank more gently replied; he began to see that there was less occasion to fear than to pity the strange woman.

"They said he was a swindler, but it was those higher in power who laid the plot and reaped the harvest—my boy was never in their confidence. It was their game from the first to make him bear the blame; it was for that they made him their confidential clerk; and when the bubble burst all men said it was Locke who had done the deed. As though employers could be ignorant, in such a gigantic affair, of what was being done."

"It was pretty rough," Hank acknowledged.

He no longer felt any fear, supernatural or otherwise, of the woman. If appearances were correct, she was one driven insane, or to melancholy, by wrongs of some kind.

"Do you think my boy could have done such a thing, sir?" she continued.

"No, I don't."

"It was not his nature. Locke was a brave, noble fellow, and he was above all meanness. But that did not save him: the plotters selected him as the one upon whom the odium should fall, and they laid their plans so well that all believed him guilty—all save his best friends. Lizzie and I know different—do you know Lizzie, sir?"

"No."

"She is my daughter, and she has come here to clear her brother's name. She has found one of the swindlers; he who was the chief of all; and she will force him to do us justice."

"I hope she will succeed. Is she here now?"

"No; she is at the cabin. I live alone in the cave, for my head is not right and people would talk if I went abroad. Do you know who I am, sir?"

"No."

"I am Leah, the Forsaken!"

The woman's voice was inexpressibly mournful as she uttered these words, and Hank was so moved to pity that he laid his hand upon hers.

"Be of good cheer," he said, "I trust all will end well, and that you will soon be living in a nice house and in happiness."

"Do you think they will find my boy?"

"I hope they will, madam. What is his name?"

"Locke Bassett."

Hank repeated the name mechanically, but it was new to him and threw no light on the case. Already, however, with his thoroughly generous nature, he was feeling an impulse to aid this woman of sorrow, who called herself by so mournful a name.

His thoughts took a practical turn, however, when a hand fell heavily on his shoulder.

CHAPTER XX.

GOLIATH'S HEAVY HAND.

HORSESHOE HANK wheeled like a flash. The new grasp was not like that lately given by the woman; it was heavy, harsh and strong, and the sport felt that the anger of a strong man was behind it.

He wheeled and saw—Goliath, the mulatto.

Usually, the meeting would have been far from startling; but the giant no longer wore the calm expression common to him. His broad face was contracted to an ominous scowl, and the flash of his eyes boded ill to the horseshoe sport.

"Dog!" he shouted, "what are you doing here?"

Hank looked at him with bewilderment; he was so guiltless of evil-doing, even in thought, that he could not at once imagine wherein he had offended; but he was not one to long be at fault.

"Well, as near as I can get at the bottom facts, I'm not doing anything, just now. Have you got a job?"

"Silence!" vociferated the mulatto. "Utter another word and I will kill you like a dog!"

"I'm sorry to set up for a kicker; but I must really be allowed free use of my tongue, while as for the killing, it's a game two can play at, with ease. Just keep your distance, my benevolent friend, until we can talk this matter over. I have a dim, haunting suspicion that when all is made clear we won't see any reason for cutting each other's throats."

"This is my friend, Goliath, and the friend of Locke," said the woman, who had been passing her hand over her forehead, and, evidently, trying to clear away the mental mists and understand what they were talking about.

"He is a spy!" the mulatto declared.

"Take time to think, Goliath, as I have done, and I don't believe you will make that accusa-

tion," said Hank, quietly. "You have seen me as your friend, and that of Miss Deane, and I don't believe you will accuse me of so soon whiffling around to the other side. No; I am no spy, and I can most truly say I am here without my own consent. Some dog who wanted me to go up the flume tossed me into Gilpin's Chase. I was perfectly helpless; couldn't get out to save my skin, and the first thing I knew I was shot down into this place as from a catapult. Thus, you see I am only a boarder, as it were."

This explanation was made with the utmost frankness; but Goliath still looked at him doubtfully. Then he turned his gaze on Leah, as the woman had called herself.

"He is our friend—he will help us to find Locke," she said, in her melancholy voice.

Goliath motioned to Hank to step aside.

"What has she told you?" he asked.

"Nothing that is coherent. As near as I can make out, she has a son named Locke, who has suffered some wrong, and she is very anxious to see him again—to 'find' him, as she expresses it. That is the amount of the whole business, and if there is a secret you don't want the world to know, I certainly have not caught on. Even if I had, you are Miss Deane's friend, and I shall never open my lips to betray you."

Goliath's face had expressed various shades of doubt and irresolution during this speech; but when he spoke his voice had nearly assumed its old evenness.

"This shall be settled by one other than myself. Are you ready to go to her?"

"To Miss Deane?"

"To one who can speak with authority."

"Certainly; lead the way wherever you see fit. The sooner I am out of this hole, the better. I have no hankering for the society of the madwoman, though if I can do her any good I shall be glad to do so; but the air of the outer world suits me better than this."

"We will go at once. First, let me speak to Leah."

He returned to the woman, and spoke kindly, even respectfully, to her for some time. She listened with her usual air of melancholy, and said but little, seeming to implicitly accept all the mulatto said, and then he left her and returned to Hank.

"Let us go!" he said, simply.

The sport followed in silence and Goliath led the way along passages where the darkness was unbroken. Hank only kept the course by closely following the guide, but the latter strode forward so fearlessly that the former took it for granted the way was open and safe and followed in the same way. Once or twice he addressed the leader, but only monosyllabic replies were vouchsafed.

Goliath at length paused and faced his companion.

"You are now about to see the place of exit," he said, "and I trust to your honor to keep the secret of it."

"Rest assured I will. I am no persecutor of women," Hank answered, somewhat curtly.

"Enough! Follow me!"

After going a few feet further the mulatto bent and seemed to put forth his strength on some invisible object to the Man of Big Luck. A slight grating noise followed, and then the rush of fresh air told that the way was clear.

They went out through a place so small that they had to stoop, and then Goliath closed the way behind them. Hank, glancing about, recognized the ground about them and knew they were near the cabin where lived Lida Deane.

To this place they at once went. A light was burning in the larger room, and when Goliath knocked the door was promptly opened by Lida.

She seemed somewhat surprised to see Hank, but at once stepped back and invited him to enter. He obeyed, Goliath followed, and then she barred the door and joined them in the main room. Hank, who was a man to make the most of circumstances, had taken a seat, but the mulatto stood leaning against the wall, his broad face set and stern.

Lida seemed to read its expression and glanced inquiringly at the Man of Big Luck.

"Goliath has something to say to you," the sport quietly observed. "I will be the audience until he is through."

"I am listening," she answered, directing her attention to the mulatto.

"I have been to the cave," the latter abruptly began. "I entered and found this man there."

He stretched one hand out toward Hank with a gesture which indicated hostility, but the sport's gaze was fixed on Lida and he saw her start. The information seemed to startle her, but her face did not reflect the hostility of the giant.

Hank made no comments, and then Goliath resumed and told the story in detail, after which the sport explained his own share in the affair. Lida had watched him closely while he spoke and seemed weighing every word and look, but Hank, conscious of good intentions, did not waver in the least.

"This is the whole story in a nutshell," he added. "As I said before, circumstances over which I had no control introduced me to the

place, and I am a wet and bruised man in consequence. I am certainly not the person to spread abroad secrets thus learned, and I trust that I have already proved my friendship to such a degree that you will not regard me as a dangerous sharer of your secret."

Goliath looked fixedly at his mistress. It was plain he was unmoved by the fair-sounding argument, and though Hank had previously regarded him very favorably, he had a suspicion that if Lida decided adversely, the mulatto would be willing to proceed to extremities to keep the secret.

But the girl did not decide thus.

"I am sure you speak the truth," she answered. "You have proved yourself my friend to a degree I cannot forget, and when I say that the secret you have accidentally learned is a part of that you have previously seen something of, you can see the importance of keeping it from outsiders. Wait a moment! I have faith to believe you will not divulge what you have learned."

"You never spoke nearer the truth, Miss Deane. I can keep a secret, and I will keep yours. I swear it!"

"That is enough."

"You must not forget to mention the importance of it," Goliath imperiously broke in.

"It is impossible to overestimate its importance. My dearest hopes and my future are at stake."

"I will guard them all," said Hank, steadily. "I have before said I would be glad to help you, and though I have no desire to force my services upon you, I still stand ready to do so, for I cannot but believe your cause just. In any case, you can rely on me to preserve secrecy."

Goliath came forward with long strides, a book held in his hand.

"Swear!" he said, in a deep and imperious voice.

Hank glanced at the book; it was the Bible.

Lida started forward.

"No," she said. "Your word of honor is enough."

"I am willing to go further," the sport answered, and he laid his hand on the book and steadily added, "I swear!"

The girl laughed somewhat uneasily.

"Goliath is so devoted to my interests that he is inclined to proceed to extreme measures."

"I can't blame him; a good cause can never be too strongly bolstered up."

"Our cause is good. The unfortunate woman you saw in the cave is my mother, and it was deep wrongs that made her what she is. You can well imagine that it was no common thing which so darkened her mind. Her past is all gone from her knowledge, except that part which refers to the tragedy of our family. This tragedy—"

"Do not say too much!" broke in the mulatto.

"Goliath, your devotion misleads you," said Lida, with kind firmness. "You mean well, as I am positive, but you do not look so far into the matter as I do. Having given Mr. Hank so much of an insight into our affairs, he must know more, in order that he may see our cause is just; I shall tell all."

The mulatto frowned and laid down the book with more force than seemed necessary, but Hank was far from blaming him. He saw that he was a man of strong mind and intelligence, and something more than a mere servant, and his caution and devotion to Lida's interest alike did him honor.

At the same time the sport was pleased at the prospect of further advancing in Lida's confidence and good will. Each time he saw her his interest increased, and he felt that it was a very desirable thing to be her friend.

Before more could be said, however, a knock sounded at the door. The trio started and looked inquiringly at each other. The hour was late for visitors, and as such people seldom came to the cabin, there was a general, though unspoken, inquiry: who was seeking admittance?

CHAPTER XXI.

THE SECRET OF THE VENDETTA.

GOLIATH glared at the door as though about to go on the war-path, but it was Lida who first recovered her self-possession. She moved to the door of an inner room, opened it and motioned to them to enter, and they promptly obeyed. The idea seemed wise; Hank, at least, ought not to be seen at the cabin.

"Remain where you are, unless I actually need your help," she said, as she nearly closed the door.

She was acting on the unspoken theory that the visit was to be a hostile one; Hank had the same idea, without knowing why he thought so. And the mulatto touched his arm and spoke in a subdued voice.

"Have you weapons?"

"None, save my knife."

"Take this revolver, then; there is no knowing what will happen."

Hank was surprised at this proof of confidence, but he took the weapon without hesitation. A ray of light fell through the open

space of the doorway, and falling on the mulatto's face, showed it to be set and anxious. What did he expect? Hank asked himself the question, and wondered if he was to be drawn into a free fight; but he felt that he could battle for Lida with good grace.

She opened the outer door and Hank saw her start.

"Good-evening, Miss Deane!"

The voice sounded beyond her, and this time both the listening men started. Hank, for one, recognized the voice as that of Parker Clifton. Matters seemed coming to a focus.

"Good-evening, sir," answered Lida, with more firmness than one would expect. "Will you walk in?"

"That was my object in coming here, and, with your permission, I will."

So saying, Clifton crossed the threshold, and stood in the little room. He wore a cloak and wide hat, in place of the fashionable one he usually appeared in, and the Man of Big Luck suspected he had been at some pains to conceal his identity from any one he chanced to meet on his way to the cabin.

He glanced about the little room keenly, and then, at Lida's invitation, sat down.

"Where is your giant?" he asked.

"He went out on business half an hour ago. Didn't you see him at the village?"

"I did not look, nor am I anxious to see him. My business is with you. I thought it was about time for you to visit me again, and as I did not care to see you there, I took time by the forelock and came here."

"Well, sir, I am ready to talk."

"I am glad of it, and I hope this may be our last interview. I have come to a decision."

"Well, sir?"

"I have heretofore, for very good reasons, kept a certain fact from your knowledge, but after the turn affairs have taken I am more than ready to make all plain. If you had used your eyes when you came to Stonewall Bend, and not kept so close to your quarters, you would have ended your mission at once."

"I do not understand."

"When you came to the Bend, your brother was here."

"Locke?"

"Even so."

Hank heard Goliath breathe heavily, and the face of the girl was no longer calm and cold. She had no good reason for believing Clifton, whose want of veracity had already been fully proven, but he made the assertion in a way which carried conviction with it. If he spoke truly, there was excuse for emotion.

But doubt soon assailed her and she looked at him unbelievingly and scornfully.

"Do you expect me to believe this?"

"I can prove it, if you wish. Mr. Locke Bassett figured under a false name, as became one in his position, but he had certain peculiarities of personal appearance, and if you get any one whom you can trust to describe him, I am sure you will be convinced he was your brother."

"Was my brother? Why do you use the past tense?"

"Because he is gone from the Bend."

"Where?"

"Really, I don't know, and perhaps I can no better explain what I mean than by telling you the name he bore when here."

"What was it?"

"Ross Gilmore!"

The assertion fell with startling force upon the ears of the listeners and Lida started and changed color. It had never been her fortune to see the junior partner of the Golden Brick since she came to the town, but his history was well known to her and, if what men said was true, it was a record from which no grain of honor could be gathered. Runaway and thief, all honest men in Stonewall Bend despised the man.

But, believing implicitly in her brother's honor, she was far from accepting his statement as true.

"It is false!" she burst forth, impetuously.

"It is as true as that we live," Clifton answered, and his manner almost convinced Hank, if not the others.

"My brother an absconder?"

"You may as well know the truth. When you first came to me after your arrival at the Bend, I concealed the truth; I bore some pretty sharp talk from you in order to protect Locke. You was all against me; you believed me a villain of the deepest dye because of that old affair in Colorado, and would have it that Locke Bassett was an angel and my dupe. On the contrary, I had a friendship for him, and I resolved to protect him if I could. I managed to get you away that time and consult with him. I saw him and arranged the course I have followed. We believed you would soon give up your vendetta and go away, and he was to keep out of sight as much as he could."

The speaker paused and a hard look settled on his heretofore composed face.

"Well?" questioned Lida.

Her own face was pale and set, but it gave little clew to what was passing in her mind save that she was deeply moved.

"I was ill-requited for my efforts in his be-

half," Clifton continued, with a touch of bitterness in his voice. "We agreed that it was better to sell the mine and slip quietly away. You have undoubtedly heard the particulars of the sale. An accident prevented me from being present, and Locke Bassett, *alias* Ross Gilmore, pocketed the money and fled. It was his second financial irregularity, and I am ten thousand dollars to the bad."

"And this man is my brother?"

"It is Locke Bassett."

A moment of silence followed, during which Hank, at least, was asking himself if the statement was true. If so, the brother of Lida was ineffectually branded as a villain.

"This is not all," continued Clifton, in a gloomy voice. "Ross Gilmore, as I will call him, professed such a devotion to my interests, and was really so capable a man, that, when he professed an affection for my daughter, I offered no objection and they became engaged. All my hopes of the future are concentrated in Stella, and you may, perhaps, imagine my grief and indignation when I learned that, all the while he was wooing her, he was really infatuated with that Mira Garrett, and only making a pretense with Stella to further his own ends."

Clifton looked as deeply touched as a parent should do, but Lida's eyes flashed and she arose from her chair.

"You are overdoing the matter!" she ejaculated, sharply. "You make a mistake when you heap all imaginable accusations upon the unfortunate man; I do not believe one of them. I was the almost constant companion of my poor brother for eighteen years, and I know him to be the personification of honor."

"That is according to one's estimate of the term," said Clifton, with a slight sneer.

"You do not understand. I deny that my brother is Ross Gilmore!"

"I swear that he is, and, as I said, any citizen who knew him will give you a convincing description. The peculiar mole on his left cheek must be remembered by all."

"And you assert that he has now absconded with your money?"

"Yes."

"I do not believe it!"

"It is your privilege to doubt."

"Further than this, I believe you know where Ross Gilmore is."

"Oh! you are one of those who insinuate I was a party to his flight?"

"Yes; I am!"

"Well, between you and me, I swear by all hopes of heaven that you are wrong. I was not a party to the flight, nor do I now know where Gilmore is. He simply took possession of the money on his own responsibility and cleared out. And now, let us finish this interview, for the hour is getting late. I have told you the simple, unvarnished truth. I trusted your brother and he proved false to me. I have told you the facts of the case, hoping you would be sensible enough to accept the inevitable."

"And go away?"

"Yes. It is all rubbish to lay the blame of the Queen Mary mine affair to me. When it was started I was the chief stockholder, but, being engaged in other business, I did not go to Beeswax Flat to operate it, while my shares were represented under a fictitious name that Denver capitalists might not know I was in it. I trusted the management to my partners, who were at Beeswax. If they went into crookedness—and it seems they did—it was not my fault. After the crash, Locke Bassett disappeared. For a year his whereabouts was unaccounted for. Then he came to me, here at the Bend, and begged for employment. He said he had been over-persuaded in the Queen Mary affair, and that he was sorry for what he did. I believed him, took him into partnership and made him rich. As Ross Gilmore, too, he was respected. He has rewarded me by breaking Stella's heart and stealing my money."

"Do you expect me to believe all this?"

"That is as you see fit."

"Well, I shall do nothing of the kind. You make poor Locke one of the worst villains in the world, and I know he is not guilty of all you assert. I boldly say I know he is innocent, while you, Parker Clifton, you are the most unscrupulous and evil of men!"

She made the assertion standing erect, her fine form drawn to its full height, and there was something in her manner which vaguely recalled to Hank's mind the stories he had read of the heroines of old times.

But as he saw the ominous light in Clifton's eyes, he felt that it was well the girl was not alone with him in the cabin.

CHAPTER XXII.

WAH HO COMES TO GRIEF.

THE Man of Big Luck turned to where Goliath had been standing, but the mulatto was no longer by his side. Where he had gone was uncertain; it was too dark in the room to discover if he was already there; but it was not likely he was far away, and Hank gave the matter no further thought.

He turned again toward the pair in the outer room.

Except for that ominous glitter in his eyes, Clifton did not show in any way that he was touched by Lida's spirited words. He arose and spoke again in an even voice.

"Since you entertain that opinion, we need not talk further. I will announce my ultimatum and go. If you come to me within twenty-four hours and accept the inevitable, agreeing not to circulate any absurd rumors about me, I will give you five hundred dollars, since I understand you are poor—"

"I will not accept a cent; the money, if received from you, would burn my fingers, and I will not be indebted to you."

"Do you still persist in your crusade against me?"

"I am resolved to secure justice for an unfortunate and persecuted brother!"

"You are at liberty to do as you see fit; I wish you joy!"

So saying, Clifton walked toward the door and opened it. Horseshoe Hank noticed, as he did so, that he fumbled about the latch what seemed an unnecessary time, rattling it perceptibly, and his object became clearer when, as it opened, Wah Ho, the Chinaman, crossed the threshold.

No sooner did the sport see him than he remembered the face which hovered for a moment over him as he was hurled into Gilpin's Chase, and the conviction came to him that the man he then saw was the same one.

The appearance of the Chinaman was enough to fill Lida with instant fear. He was larger than the average of his race and had a broad face which bore a sinister stamp, and his almond-shaped eyes were turned on the girl with an expression which made her recoil.

Clifton raised one hand and pointed at her.

It was a signal, and Wah Ho leaped forward like a flash.

She turned to flee, but only a few steps had been taken when he overtook and seized her in his arms.

Horseshoe Hank was not the man to let such an event pass unheeded. He would have preferred to keep his presence a secret from Clifton, but as Goliath was not at hand to go to the rescue, he must.

He bounded through the door like a flash, and just as Lida uttered a cry for help, Wah Ho's arms were torn loose and he was dashed to the floor with a resounding thud.

A common man would have remained there, half-stunned, but, greatly to Hank's surprise, the Chinaman bounded up as though he was made of rubber, and made for him.

It was not often the Man of Big Luck was taken by surprise, but it must be confessed that he stood like a statue until Wah Ho wrapped his long arms about him. His hold was like that of a vise and Hank almost believed his bones would crack, but his inaction quickly ended and he moved in turn.

He caught the Chinaman in the best hold presented to him, and in a moment more they were staggering about the room in a close grapple, each endeavoring to throw the other, but finding a skill not easily overcome.

Clifton had started toward Lida, but a heavy step suddenly sounded and Goliath bounded into the room.

The mulatto's face was convulsed with fury and the gleam of his eyes reminded the elder man of those of a jaguar he once faced in a Texas chaparral.

The new-comer held a revolver, and he at once presented it at Clifton's breast.

"Dog!" he shouted, in a voice which rung through the room like the voice of doom, "dare to lay a hand on her and you are a dead man!"

"Hold on!" promptly answered Clifton. "Don't you see my hands are up? I'm not touching any one, am I?"

"See to it that you don't!"

Lida's defender had never appeared to better advantage. He stood before her like a lion defending its young, and his broad face was full of terrible battle-fire. Clifton was no coward, but he would as soon have faced a veritable lion as the mulatto at that moment.

Still, he did not reply, for, as though by mutual consent, their own case was suspended while they watched Hank and Wah Ho struggle for supremacy.

Always before the Man of Big Luck had looked with scorn on the children of the Orient and considered himself capable of whipping their best man with one hand, but in the steel-like arms of Wah Ho he found a power only equalled by his skill.

Never before had he met such a foeman.

Back and forth they struggled in that close embrace, while the walls of the little building shook under their heavy tread.

The tactics of the Celestial were peculiar, leaving Hank no regular way of meeting his attacks, and as each defense had not only to be impromptu but original, he was put to his utmost efforts.

Still, he resolved to end the struggle soon and to his credit, and he watched for a chance to catch Wah Ho by some of the many "locks" known to him.

He saw the chance at last and improved it. The spectators could not tell how it was done, but the wrestlers revolved for a moment with increased rapidity, and then Wah Ho shot over the American's head like a shot and descending, dropped on the floor with a resounding crash.

The Man of Big Luck staggered back against the wall, breathing heavily, and drew his revolver.

He had no desire to again grapple with the Celestial.

But the latter did not at once arise. Not only had he struck as a dead weight, but the lock which had projected him had seemed to almost tear his joints asunder, and he lay still, a dazed and badly demoralized man.

Goliath deliberately insinuated the toe of his boot in his ribs.

"Get up, you rat-eater!" he ordered.

"Me no glitte up; me dead already, all samee!" was the mournful reply.

"You'll die again, if you don't look out."

"Blones all blokee; skull all crackee; plitty much total wreck all samee. 'Melican man fight like cussee!"

"Oh! you rib-cracking heathen!" muttered the sport, "you'll knock the rag right off the American flag and make the British lion roar in the key of G! Shoot me if you don't rake the pot on the wrestle!"

No one answered. Wah Ho had partially arisen and was caressing one of his lower limbs, while Clifton glanced from face to face with an uneasy expression. Goliath looked at Hank with friendly eyes, while Lida awaited with more than ordinary calmness for the next act in the drama.

It was Hank who spoke first.

"This Gordian knot must be cut," he said, "and the sooner it is done, the better. Miss Deane, how shall we dispose of your visitors?"

"The sooner they go the better I shall be pleased."

"I am ready," quickly interpolated Clifton.

"You're too almighty ready!" retorted the Man of Big Luck, "and the young lady will break my heart if she don't rope you in. I reckon Judge Lynch could fit a collar to your neck which would make a fit able to lay fashionable goods 'way over."

"Nothing of the kind must occur!" interrupted Lida.

Hank held up both hands in comical horror.

"What next?" he groaned. "They smote you on one cheek and you turned the other; you've forgiven them repeatedly; but if you do so again I can't say s'mote it be. Excuse my pun and hang Clifton."

"Don't be too free with your tongue!" said Clifton, making a rally, as he saw he was likely to be forgiven.

"Oh! you dry up, old Nero! Don't put on any airs here, for if the jury clears you on this charge I've got a rod in pickle on my own hook. I happen to know who chucked me in Gilpin's Chase a few hours ago. It was that rat-charrmer with the sulphuric face and the mighty grip; but you're his boss, and I can see you tried to shuffle me off the board because I was helping Buckley. We'll lay this case on the table for now; but I'll drop in on you some time, and we'll have a cold collation. Captain Deane, give your orders!"

"I merely wish to remind Mr. Clifton and his man that the door is open," said Lida.

Clifton opened his mouth, as though to speak; but changed his mind, and turned and walked out of the cabin in silence. Wah Ho followed, and the trio were left together.

No one spoke at first, for even Goliath seemed reluctant to accept his mistress's decision.

It was Lida who broke the silence.

"Once more, Mr. Hank, I owe you a debt of gratitude," she said, turning a grateful look upon him.

"Don't!" he said, quickly. "Since that diabolical galoot has gone scot free I feel mean enough to eat leather. It isn't my game; but I do hate to see good cards played so loosely. You have merely given him another chance to do you injury."

"I believe it is the only chance to right my brother's wrongs, for with Clifton lays the power. To place him in the hands of the law would be to seal his lips forever."

"And by not placing him thus, I am afraid he will seal yours."

"I must be more careful in future. No one shall enter the cabin until I know who they are."

Hank presented no further arguments; but he found that under Lida's gentle exterior was a firmness of which he had not dreamed. Right or wrong, she was fixed in her theory, and she would not have Clifton molested. She hoped her perseverance would ultimately bear fruit.

Finding her firm, the sport said no more on that point; but so directed his conversation as to win her friendship and confidence. He had at last firmly established himself in the good will of both her and Goliath, and he resolved to keep the position if he could.

So far as her brother was concerned, he believed that he and Ross Gilmore were one, and that the same person was he who had robbed him of Mira Garrett, so that he stood branded as a villain of the deepest dye.

This, however, was her misfortune, not her fault.

When Hank left the cabin, somewhat later, he was supposed to return to the village; but, instead, he lay down among the rocks, not far away, resolved to watch over the cabin until day dawned.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"ONE BLOW AND I AM SAFE."

At the moment when Buckley and Dandelion Dan were looking for Horseshoe Hank, as related in a previous chapter, the morning sun fell upon a man who was sleeping in the shelter of a rock. The spot was near Lida Deane's cabin; the sleeper was the Man of Big Luck.

Little had the girl dreamed that all through the small hours of the night his care had been over the house, and had she known it she might have wondered at the cause.

When day dawned slumber overcame him, and he lost consciousness of the outside world. Lying there in the midst of the rocks, the rays of the sun fell upon his bare face; but the touch was gentle, as though even Old Sol appreciated this dumb devotion.

Two hours passed, but still Horseshoe Hank slept on.

A hundred yards away a young woman approached. She paused for a moment at sight of the cabin, and then, as though she desired to escape observation, turned to the left and moved along the rougher way among the rocks.

It was Mira Garrett.

No interruption occurred to her progress for some time, but she finally paused suddenly; she had chanced upon the man who slept under the sun's rays.

For a moment she remained as motionless as the man before her, but a look of joy suddenly flashed over her face, and her hand sought her pocket and grasped the hilt of a knife.

Before her lay the man she feared most of all on earth, one who had sworn to bring destruction to her plans—to be revenged on her and the man she had chosen in preference to him; and the one whom she knew, from his bravery and keenness, was capable of doing all this, if any one could.

He was there—in her power!

Ay; he lay buried in slumber, unconscious of all that was transpiring around him, and one straight, sure blow from her knife would forever still the motions of that chest which was rising and falling so regularly.

The chance might never come again.

She drew the knife half-way from its sheath, and then thrust it back again, while her face grew pale. Never had she stained her hands with human blood, and what was good in her nature recoiled at the idea.

She took one step to flee, and then turned back again.

The temptation which assailed her was terrible.

"One blow, and I am safe!" she whispered, huskily.

One blow! It meant the extinguishing of a human life; it meant the stain of blood on her hands. Her face was ghastly, seeming to reflect the battle which raged within her. Her better angel was urging her to flee; her worse one whispered again that one blow would forever rid her of one who, if suffered to live, would doubtless blast her future.

She yielded!

Once more she drew the knife; this time fully. The sun's rays fell upon the keen blade and the reflection touched the face of the sleeper. He moved his head a little, muttered indistinctly, and then slept on.

Mira crept nearer to him and marked the spot where she would strike. She raised the knife; it hovered in mid-air over his breast; she nerv'd her arm for the fatal blow.

It did not fall.

Her wrist was suddenly seized in a firm grasp and realizing that she was detected, she uttered a cry and leaped to her feet.

The sound was sufficient to arouse Horseshoe Hank, and he, too, bounded up as though galvanized. The god of slumber was banished in a twinkling, and he stood looking straight ahead with keen and comprehensive glance.

He saw Mira Garrett standing like a statue, her right wrist clasped in the hand of a man. She no longer struggled, but looked at her captor with wild eyes.

It was Francis Nelson.

The latter was returning her gaze, and his own expression was stern and menacing; but both suddenly turned their eyes toward the Man of Big Luck.

The latter laughed lightly.

"So the claws of the tiger-cat are unsheathed," he said, coolly. "I knew they were there before, but they seem to have grown long and keen. Nelson, I owe you one."

"What means this extraordinary scene?" the young man asked, doubtfully.

"Judging by what I see and what I guess at, my good friend intended to cleave me," Hank coolly answered. "Had she driven that knife home, this sleep would have been my last."

"I wish I had!" she passionately declared.

"That's all right, Mira, but how about the undersigned? I have no desire to be served up in slices on a platter. Mr. Nelson, I hope you are able to sleep well o' nights."

"Comfortably," said Francis, dryly. "Is this a piece of comedy, after all?"

"Well, it may be thus styled, I suppose, now the gun has missed fire, but if I had taken my feed in the way of steel, it would have been tinged with tragedy. But we will let it pass; women are privileged characters. Mira, we will excuse you."

The girl hesitated for a moment and then flung her knife from her as though it had been a viper. It went ringing over the rocks, and before its flight was done she was gone from the place. Not once looking behind her she hurried away, and Hank and Nelson were left together.

"You have had a narrow escape," said the latter.

"Oh! that don't count," said the sport, serenely. "When a woman goes to the fore, all things are possible. The fair Mira is an old friend of mine, and she improved this chance to show her good will. Joking aside, I owe you one for thus opportunely coming to my aid, and beg that you will accept my thanks."

"I am glad to have aided you, but I cannot see why she should have attacked you."

"Some things are enigmas," said the sport, philosophically. "Mira don't love me, that is sure; but I did not think she would go so far as to try to carve me. Now we are together, allow me to ask you a question. You are a friend of Ross Gilmore?"

"I am," Francis firmly answered.

"What do you know of his past?"

"Comparatively little. He has told me that he was born in the East, in Pennsylvania, but that is all."

"Was his real name Gilmore?"

"Really, I don't know, but I have no reason to suppose otherwise," Francis coldly answered. "Have you reason for believing it was not his real name?"

"I won't say that, but there is no telling."

"I suppose you are one who thinks evil of him, but you do him injustice. Ross was the soul of honor. I knew him intimately, and whatever others assert, I shall remain his friend. Men speak harshly of him now, but the time will come when his reputation will be fully cleared; I am sure of it."

"Well, I hope so," was the dubious reply. "But, Nelson, have you ever in the past heard him speak of his family? Have you no clew to anything of this sort? Do you know of a father, a mother or a sister?"

Francis shook his head.

"No. Ross was always reserved on this point, and I obtained the idea that he had been crossed in love, or something of the sort, and preferred to say nothing about it. But I am positive there has been nothing in his life of which he need be ashamed. This cloud, sir, will soon blow over."

He spoke with firmness and looked Hank in the face as though defying him to deny Gilmore's innocence. But the Man of Big Luck did nothing of the kind. Perceiving that Nelson was as blindly devoted to the missing man as was Lida, he was not foolish enough to provoke argument and ill-will.

He soon left his companion and walked toward the village. As he went his mind was busy over Gilmore's case.

He, for one, did not doubt his guilt. Granting that he was Locke Bassett, the brother of Lizzie, alias "Lida Deane," his career was a dark and crooked one. When the fraud of the Queen Mary mine was sprung upon the people of Beeswax Flat, Locke Bassett had been the one who was the most blamed, and it seemed absurd to suppose he was ignorant of what the concern was doing. This was in 1881.

In 1882, if the chain of identification was complete, he appeared in Colorado, near his—Hank's—ranch, and won Mira Garrett's heart and ran away with her. Immediately after, he began his career in Stonewall Bend. He had ended it by absconding with ten thousand dollars belonging to his senior partner.

This record was certainly a dark and crooked one.

For Clifton, the sport had no sympathy. Gilmore had been his ally in the Queen Mary fraud, and he had taken him again into his fold only to have the peculiar tactics of the firm played upon himself. The elder villain had been overreached by the younger.

All this, if matters stood as Hank believed; possibly, however, Clifton was a party to the flight.

For the first time the Man of Big Luck began to waver in his determination to punish the man who had stolen Mira from him. The man was Lida Deane's brother. This should have counted as nothing, but, without seeking to explain why, Hank felt a desire to save her unnecessary pain, and to be her friend, which he could not be if he waged his vendetta on her brother.

"I need time to think this matter over," he thought, as he strode homeward. "It's hard to give up my plans, but there is a strong pull the other way and—well, we'll see!"

He paused suddenly as he mentally pronounced this decision. He was passing the house of Parker Clifton, and as he turned a wary eye in that direction, thinking of Gilpin's Chase and the hug of Wah Ho, he saw a man just entering the door.

It was Amos Buckley.

"Hello!" he thought, "has my respected employer gone crazy? I told him not to go there without my permission. Well, I am a couple hours late at the rendezvous, and I suppose he got tired of waiting. He's a fool to go there, however! I'm sure he will do something rash!"

Buckley it was who was visiting Clifton. Becoming tired of waiting for the horseshoe sport, he had struck out on his own responsibility.

We will follow him to his interview.

He was ushered into Clifton's presence without delay. The latter had slept deeply the last part of the night, untroubled by dreamy visions of the trouble at the Deane cabin, but as soon as he became conscious he remembered all and, as he scented trouble not far away, he was in a most vicious and dangerous mood.

CHAPTER XXIV.

BUCKLEY DEMANDS THE GOLDEN BRICK.

CLIFTON'S mental acerbity did not appear in his reception of his visitor. Years of practice enabled him to smile when he was feeling anything but in a mood for it, and with admirable politeness he bade Buckley welcome, made a remark about the weather and conducted him to a chair.

But Amos allowed but little time to go to waste before coming to the point.

"Is there news of Gilmore?" he asked.

"Not yet; that is, nothing definite. I have received reports from Denver, Salt Lake City, Leadville and Boise City. At the former, my detectives tell of a man seen in a gambling-room who looked like Gilmore; at the Mormon town, a strange Gentile went on a spree and did some mischief, but got out of sight before my man got into sight. There may be something in one of these reports, but detective work always unearths a lot of theories and false scents, and we cannot count on Gilmore until he is actually seized."

"That may never be," said Buckley, despondently.

"I will find him if I turn the Western Hemisphere upside down!" was the firm and original assertion.

"It will not be easy, and the West, with its far-stretching acres, furnishes thousands of hiding-places where he may defy your men."

"Do not understand me as saying we can catch the fellow in a week; it may be a year."

"That is just what I fear," said Buckley, catching at the rope thus left within his reach. "And what, in the meanwhile, is to be the fate of the Golden Brick?"

"Oh! I'll furnish funds to keep that running. You deserve some compensation for your trouble."

"Thank you, Mr. Clifton, but I will not ask this of you. I can manage the mine, and, with your permission, I will take possession at once. There is no reason why we should await Gilmore's capture, and I suggest that we draw up a new deed to-day, and that I formally occupy the Golden Brick to-morrow."

"A deed signed by me, alone, would be null and void."

"I am willing to risk it. Gilmore has absconded and, when he is captured, he will become a criminal. As such, his signature will be worthless. The better way is to ignore him entirely. We two can settle the business."

"Ah! but I can do nothing so irregular as that!" and Mr. Clifton shook his head solemnly.

"Well, at least give me possession of the mine."

"Why are you in such haste?" irritably asked Clifton.

"Haste? Well, I've paid for the Golden Brick and I want it!" somewhat warmly answered Buckley.

"I have not received a penny."

"It was paid to your partner, by your direction, in the presence of your clerk, Ruford, and Lawyer Jones. If Ross Gilmore ran away with the money, it is your misfortune, not my fault."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure of what?"

"That it was not your fault?"

"What do you mean, sir?"

The two men faced each other belligerently, and it seemed as though the thin crust of their civility was about to break in and leave them floundering in hostile quarters.

"I have a theory in this matter," Clifton answered, viciously, "and now that I see you are determined to harp on the subject, I will make it public. I assert nothing, sir, but it is my opinion that you and Ross Gilmore formed a deliberate scheme to rob, to swindle me!"

Buckley sat dumfounded before this accusation. He had never done a dishonest thing in his life, and the idea rendered him speechless for awhile.

"I will speak plainly," continued Clifton, "and say that I am prepared to fight this matter to the last gasp. Mr. Ruford shares the opinion

I have expressed, and will give you thorough investigation before I surrender the Golden Brick!"

"Good Heavens!" ejaculated Buckley, "what object could I have in leaguing myself with Gilmore?"

"If any, it was to obtain the mine without paying for it. My dishonest partner takes the money and decamps; you take the mine. I get nothing. Understand me, I do not assert this; I merely state my suspicions. And on this basis I propose to make my fight. I will not tamely surrender the Golden Brick without a money equivalent, and it's an old saying that possession is nine points of the law. I will try to illustrate this if you attempt to occupy the mine by force."

Buckley thought he saw the plot. In his eyes, Clifton stood branded a villain, and he believed what had occurred had at the first been arranged by the partners, in concert. Gilmore according to the plan, had run away with the money, and now Clifton intended to hold the mine.

Unless he erred, it was a deliberate scheme to rob him.

"This is infamous, sir!" he exclaimed.

"So I think!" sarcastically retorted Clifton.

"I shall not submit."

"Very good; make your fight and see what the result will be. I shall fight to the last gasp, and I'll give you and Gilmore a lesson."

"You can't deceive me!" exclaimed Buckley.

"I am trying to undeceive you."

"You are trying to rob me of my mine; you and Gilmore. It is a base conspiracy, but I will not submit!"

"You are at liberty to do whatever you choose—if you can. I have at last spoken plainly, Amos Buckley, and I do not see that we need talk further. You may take your departure as soon as you see fit!"

He arose as he spoke and Buckley did the same. The latter was choking with rage, and almost overwhelmed at the prospect of losing the Golden Brick, and he felt that he was in no condition to talk further. He put on his hat and made his way almost blindly to the door. He went out and strode away, his mind in a whirl, and scarcely conscious where he went.

It was not until he reached the hotel that his head cleared. Entering, he saw Horseshoe Hank sitting at a table and calmly puffing a cigar, and he caught at the chance to secure advice as a drowning man is said to do at a straw.

He invited the sport to his room and laid the case before him in its new light. Hank was not surprised. He had already discovered that Clifton was a rascal, and it was not strange that he had formed this elaborate plan for fighting Buckley's claim and securing public sympathy.

It was not an easy matter to form a plan which would baffle him. No doubt Ruford would swear to whatever his master wished; and though the testimony of Lawyer Jones would, in a measure offset it, the latter had little real influence, while, if Clifton was really shrewd, he would manufacture no evidence which would conflict with that of Jones.

"Shall I proceed to law, or bring our men from Boise City, as you once suggested, and take the mine by force?" Buckley asked.

Hank hastened to advise against the latter course. It seemed clear that Clifton was going to make an elaborate defense, and work solely through the law, in which case any forcible seizure on Buckley's part would prejudice men against him. That must be avoided.

The sport's decision was that Buckley's chief hope lay in the capture of Ross Gilmore, but, in the meanwhile, it would be well to take legal steps to claim his rights.

After a full discussion of every visible point, the men separated.

"The case grows more complicated," thought Horseshoe Hank, as he rejoined Dandelion Dan, "and only one thing is certain. If Mr. Ross Gilmore ever shows up, he will be sought after as dogs seek a wolf. Clifton accuses him of stealing ten thousand dollars and laying a plot with Buckley; the latter accuses him of laying a plot with Clifton and trying to steal a mine; while I accuse him of stealing Mira Garrett. He will get roasted if he ever comes to judgment. But, as to the Golden Brick, I am a good deal at sea. Is, or is not, Clifton a party to Gilmore's flight?"

At about the same time Hank was revolving this question in his mind, Francis Nelson was knocking at the door of Clifton's house. It was opened by Wah Ho, whose bones had begun to assume their former condition, and when the visitor stated that he wished to see Miss Stella, he was at once conducted to her presence.

Trouble had made its impress on the girl's fair face. Her color was less distinct than when Ross Gilmore was often by her side and all seemed tending toward a happy future for her; there were dark circles around her eyes which told of sleeplessness; and her air of melancholy sent a pang to Nelson's heart.

He loved the girl, and though circumstances had long compelled him to hide the fact, he

could not but think then what an excellent thing it would be if she could forget that his quondam friend had even ever existed.

He was kindly greeted, and then both took seats.

"I need scarcely explain why I sent for you, Mr. Nelson," said Stella, with a sad smile. "You know the matter nearest my heart. There is no news of Ross?"

"Not that I know of, Miss Clifton. I certainly have not heard anything," Francis gravely answered.

"You and he have been the best of friends. Do you suppose he would go away and leave you in ignorance of his whereabouts for any great while?"

"It does not seem possible, for our friendship has been beyond the love of brothers."

"And what of this base charge that he is a thief?"

"Groundless, Miss Clifton; I feel sure it is groundless!" Francis emphatically answered.

"My father believes differently."

"Mr. Clifton is peculiarly placed."

"True, and I suppose I ought not to blame him. But I, for one, will never believe these cruel charges. I think Ross has met with foul play—that his life has been taken!"

Tears filled the girl's eyes, and her voice trembled.

"I have a new theory," Nelson added.

"What is it?" she quickly asked.

"I suspect he has wandered away in temporary mental aberration. Not that there is any proof of such a thing, though he has seemed somewhat gloomy and nervous, at times, of late, but I can in no other way satisfactorily explain his absence. The argument of his enemies that he could not be robbed on so short a journey as he had to make, to reach his partner's house, is a strong one, and as I will not believe him a thief, I have fallen back on the theory I have just named."

CHAPTER XXV.

GRAVEL JOE RECEIVES AN OFFER.

STELLA caught at the suggestion with a degree of hope. It was not pleasant to think of the one she loved best of all earthly people as a wandering and demented person, but it was certainly better for him than for him to be a thief or the victim of assassins.

The subject was discussed in all its bearings, but Stella did not forget another important branch of it.

"What about Mira Garrett?" she finally asked. Nelson's face clouded.

"Why do you mention her?" he asked.

"I would like to know what part she had in Ross Gilmore's life. He was a visitor at her cabin; he was seen by two men to go there the evening of his disappearance and you, yourself, admit that you knew he was in the habit of so doing. People generally believe that she is his wife, and that his so-called affection for me was but a sham to obtain further hold on my father. Have you any new theories as to this matter?"

Francis avoided her gaze, and when he spoke it was in a tone of extreme reluctance.

"I cannot believe all this, and will not. I am sure his love for you was sincere, and if the Garrett girl is his wife, I believe he deeply regretted the fact, and sincerely cared for you, and you only."

"Good heavens! do you call this a defense—an excuse? Does it clear Ross to say: 'He had a wife, but he did not love her; he made love to another woman, for whom he sincerely cared?'"

"Miss Clifton, what am I to say?" desperately asked the young man. "You hem me in; I cannot escape! You are my friend; Ross was my friend. How can I be faithful to both? If it was not for the unfortunate Garrett affair I could speak fearlessly for him, but that must have meant something, and how can I excuse it to you—the woman who loved him?"

"I do not wish you to excuse it," Stella answered, with unexpected severity, "and the fact that you are inclined to do so makes me doubt your loyalty to me. What I desire is the truth, and then I will judge Ross Gilmore. I will not believe him guilty until the fact is proven, but I want no 'excuses,' Mr. Nelson."

"Pardon me, but I am only saying what I try to believe," said Francis, with evident and deep sorrow.

"It is my place, not yours, to ask pardon; I was too harsh. But now, be frank. Do you believe Mira is his wife?"

"She denies it, emphatically."

"Of course she would, now he is in trouble, and I see you are inclined to deny it, also," retorted Stella, with positive anger. "Enough, sir; we will say no more. I am tired of your repeated evasions, and as it is clear you are not my friend, I will not detain you longer."

She arose, but Francis also started up, a startled look on his face, and caught her hand.

"Miss Clifton!" he cried; "in mercy's name, do not leave me thus! Do not misjudge me. I am your friend—I am more than that; I would give my life for you. Do not condemn me; you will break my heart!"

His words, his passionate utterance, and more

than all, the expression on his face, could not pass unread, even then. A brief, fleeting tinge of crimson came to Stella's lips, and then she stood mute and motionless before him.

He felt that his secret was no longer his, and he dropped her hand and retreated a step, his gaze falling to the floor.

Silence reigned for a moment, and then he raised his head.

"Stella—Miss Clifton!" he said huskily—"forgive me! Heaven knows I did not intend to speak. All along I have intended my hopeless love for you should be buried in my own heart while I lived—and then in my grave. But the words were wrung from me."

"There is nothing to forgive," she answered, kindly, but there was as little warmth in her manner as though she had been a statue. "You are an honest man, and, as such, your love is an honor to any woman, even though she cannot return it. But let us not speak further now; I am faint—ill. Another time I will see you; but, for now, let us part—as friends."

"You will always find me that, Miss Clifton."

He took the hand which she extended to him, respectfully, but he gave only a light touch.

Then he put on his hat and left the room and the house.

Stella went to her room. The discovery she had thus unexpectedly made pained rather than pleased her. She believed Nelson to be a thoroughly honorable man, but it seemed as though she could never care for any one except Gilmore. She had hoped to find a true friend in Nelson, and nothing more. Still, he was not to be blamed for his love, and she felt, as she had delicately hinted to him, that it was an honor.

At the same time she could not avoid asking herself the question:

"Where has Ross Gilmore one disinterested friend besides myself?"

She did not suspect, as did Horseshoe Hank, that the missing man had one as devoted as she. If Gilmore and Locke Bassett were indeed one, he possessed a sister who would never believe him guilty until his own lips had confessed it.

Gravel Joe was one of the most unhappy men in the town of Stonewall Bend. His back was still sore from the punishment he had received at the hands of the Man of Big Luck, and as his past efforts to get the better of him had resulted so disastrously, he felt a natural diffidence about trying his luck again. To add to his grief, Zeke Bunce had deserted him. After having had his back transformed into a checkerboard, the rough had reviewed the affair carefully and decided to forgive his old partner, but Zeke was gone from the Bend forever.

This, Joe now felt, was adding insult to injury. He was deserted in his hour of affliction!

He spent his time in drinking whisky and plotting revenge on Horseshoe Hank; but when the robust form of the sport loomed up, Gravel Joe invariably sought his hole, metaphorically speaking.

The evening of the day of the scenes last described, Joe was slouching through the village, in the hang-dog fashion peculiar to him, when he was accosted by a woman.

It was a great surprise. Women were not in the habit of showing a partiality for his company—in fact, the ugliest-faced representative of the sex he had seen in five years had turned away in scorn when he intimated that it was a pleasant day; and when he saw that the one now before him was both young and pretty, he was inclined to think she had made some mistake.

He recognized her, however; it was Mira Garrett.

"I want to speak with you," she said, abruptly. "Come aside where we will have no listeners."

"I'm sure I'm proud an' delighted, marm," said the rough, in bewilderment, "but I don't preexactly see—"

He ceased speaking, but she did not answer, and nothing further was said until they had reached a sufficiently retired place.

"Now, then, Gravel Joe," she resumed, in the same abrupt way, "I think you are a man of nerve."

"So I be, marm; I'm ez narvous ez an ant."

"Nonsense! I mean, you are brave?"

"Me? Oh! Lord, yes! I'm a towerin' giraffe on roller-skates an' a devourin' lion on their spree," modestly admitted Joe, who felt that it would never do to admit that he had lost his "sand,"

"Then I have work for you."

"Name it, honored madam."

"Did you ever kill a man?"

"Did I? Did I ever kill a man? Wal, I should coincide! Go ask ther sexton o' any graveyard from the broad Mississip ter ther thunderin' echoes o' ther ontamed Pacific. He, an' they, will tell ye that ev'ry night when ther clock strikes one a score o' sheeted forms will rise from ther clammy sile an', wavin' ther' paly arms, groan an' wail in a serpentine voice: 'I saddled Gravel Joe an' got throwed!'"

"That's all right, but let me talk of live men,

not dead ones. Can you get away with one for me, unassisted?"

"Honored madam, I kin lick ther best man in Idaho single-hand, one-handed or back-handed—"

"Never mind. Well, I have an enemy, and I'll give you a hundred dollars to help me silence him."

"It's a bargain."

"I am going to write a letter and decoy him outside the village, and then we will dispose of him."

"Leave that ter me," said Joe, loftily. "I kin dispose o' a small tribe o' men with ease. I eat raw beef, an' it makes me hungry fur g-o-r, gore. That's ther kind o' a brindled jaguar I be."

"Can you act as well as you talk?"

"Wal, I should coincide. I am an ontamed—"

"The name of the man is Horseshoe Hank." Gravel Joe leaped straight up in the air.

"Who?" he ejaculated.

"Horseshoe Hank."

"Him you want killed?"

"Yes. Why—"

"Then I pass; I don't want no part on't. I'm out o' ther game, fur I ain't got a trump. I take water, cave, seek my hole, throw up the sponge. I kin lick my weight in wild-cats, but I won't mount H. Hank ter save ther queen. Ef you want him evaporated, you had better get a car-load o' dynamite, or make a requisition on ther highest fort fur a brigade o' cavalry, or wait till ther annual snow-slide, or—"

"Be still!" sharply interrupted Mira. "What do you mean by such rubbish?"

"I've tried ther coat on an' it don't fit, ar' no tailor this sile o' Siberia kin make it fit."

"You have had trouble with him?"

"Yas, he's made me a good 'eal on't. I tried ter throw him cold, but he see'd my ante, an' all ther rest o' my relations, an' made a map o' Sherman's march ter ther sea on my back with a switch. Thank ye, but I pass."

"Bah! are you afraid of one man? Only a little while ago you were boasting that you could whip tribes, armies, and so forth."

"Sech was ther drift o' my remarks. I kin lick ther army, an' ther hoss-shoe man kin lick me."

Mira was plainly discouraged for a moment, but she had not selected her ally with the intention of having him refuse, and she proceeded to use her eloquence in a way which she thought would move him.

For she was resolved that, since she would not be safe while the Man of Big Luck lived, she must win safety through his death.

CHAPTER XXVI.

DECoyed.

BUSINESS proceeded at the Golden Brick mine exactly as it had done before the sale. The men worked and were paid by Ruford, the clerk, and as long as they got their money they cared comparatively little out of whose pocket it came. The matter of the sale and its resultant circumstances were matters of wide comment, and no one could see the end.

No one was more placid of manner than Mr. Ruford, and he was polite to all. Had the firm been Clifton & Buckley, or Clifton, Buckley & the World, he would not have treated every one with more bland respect. A wonderful man in his way was Mr. Ruford.

During the forenoon Buckley had made a brief visit to the office, and the clerk treated him as though he was the acknowledged and sole owner of the Golden Brick. In the afternoon Clifton was there all the time after three o'clock, and Ruford was as serene as though no such a man as Buckley existed.

When the routine of business was over, Clifton closed the door and sat down beside his employe.

"To what extent are the men in the mine to be trusted?" he asked.

"To the extent of their interest, I suppose," said Ruford, with a slight smile, "and as you pay well, it is to their interest to have the Golden Brick remain yours."

"You do not think Buckley could bribe them?"

"No, sir; I do not."

"He and I have at last come to an open rupture, and it will now be war to the knife, I suppose. I have followed your suggestion and accused him of being an ally of Gilmore."

Ruford leaned back in his chair and laughed lightly. He was no longer the meek clerk, but he met his employer as man to man.

"How did it work?"

"He was dumfounded. Of course, he did not expect anything of the kind, and as I laid it on thick I knocked him out in one round, figuratively speaking. War having been declared, there is a possibility he may try to jump the claim, but I think he will await the capture of Gilmore, hoping to get the deed back."

Ruford laughed again.

"He don't suspect I burned it, then."

"No. He lays all the blame to Gilmore."

"You haven't received news of him?"

"No, and that is what puzzles me. I could have sworn Gilmore cared enough for Stella to

make everything else subordinate to it, but all at once he disappeared with a paltry sum of money. Just think of it; only ten thousand, when I had plainly told him I would settle twenty-five thousand on Stella the day they were married.

Ruford's eyes sparkled.

"That was generous, sir."

"I could afford it, and Stella is my only child. Besides, I care a good deal for her. Sometimes, when I think how worthy she is, I wish I was not so crooked— But enough of this."

"I heard a theory advanced to-day, in regard to Gilmore, which may have something in it."

"What was it?"

"That he had wandered away while mentally deranged."

Clifton thought for a moment.

"I do not believe it. He had a strong, well-balanced mind. Yet, I wish it was so, and that he was not hopelessly deranged; I would give a good deal to have him back. His disappearance was a serious blow to me, for it knocked my carefully laid plans in the head, and, in order to hold my own, I have been obliged to abuse him roundly. If he ever returns, he will hear of it, I suppose, but I never expect to see him again."

"Nor I. It is my opinion he is married to the Garrett woman, and that is what prevented him from taking Miss Clifton for his wife."

The elder man did not reply. He was going over the ground again which he had traveled so often before and asking himself where Ross Gilmore was. Despite the suspicions of some of his fellow-citizens, he was as ignorant of Gilmore's present whereabouts, or his motives in going, as was Stella, herself.

Clifton, however, had planned to swindle Buckley out of the Golden Brick, and while some other people were wondering what could be Gilmore's object in stealing the deed, his senior partner knew he had not stolen it.

It was Ruford who had done this, cunningly changing the papers on the table, and Clifton had been left wholly at sea by the turn affairs had taken. He was, however, making the most of it, and he proposed to hold the Golden Brick against all claimants.

With the deed burned and the hold which he possessed on public sympathy, he had little fear of the result.

He shortly bade Mr. Ruford good-night and left the office. Had he seen what occurred when the door was closed he would have been amazed. The model clerk put his thumb to his nose, and twirling his fingers in a suggestive way, shut one eye and laughed lightly.

"Go it, you old shark!" he said, in a merry undertone, "and wade in on your muscle and astonish the natives; but won't you be surprised when you find out, one of these days, that Ruford is boss of the roof. Burn the deed? That was all right for you to say; but I'm not so foolish as I look, and if you don't agree to certain conditions I'll make matters warm for you! Aba! how would you like to figure in prison for ten or fifteen years, for fraud, my dear sir. Ruford, my boy, you hold the winning cards, and you'll be an idiot if you don't play them for all they're worth. So twenty-five thousand dollars are to be settled on Stella when she is married? Good! this strengthens my resolution to take her for Mrs. Ruford. I think I see a light in the east!"

Horseshoe Hank was seated in the saloon when a small boy walked in and gave him a note. The bearer was about to retreat; but Hank stopped him.

"Who gave you this?"

"The gal what lives over in ther gulch—her name is Deane," was the prompt reply.

"Oh! Well, rest that chair by sitting down on it while I read. Maybe there will be an answer."

The sport leisurely opened the paper and read. The message was brief. Signed by the name of Lida Deane, it invited him to meet her in Dynamite Canyon that evening, and as soon as he could come. She added that she had something of importance to say.

When he had finished reading, he looked sharply at the boy.

"Where did you see the young lady?" he asked.

"I was passin' her cabin, and she stopped me."

"Did, eh? And told you to give me this letter?"

"Yes."

"What's your name?"

"Solon Briggs."

"Well, you look wise; but you'll have to take in more experience before you can match penises with your lamented ancestor whose name was Solon. One word in your ear. If I find you have lied, I'll chew you up so fine that snuff won't be any comparison."

The threat did not frighten the boy, and he persisted that he had told the truth, after which he was allowed to go; but Hank was far from feeling confident. To him, the matter looked suspicious, for he could not see why Lida should send such a messenger when she had Goliath, nor why she should select such a place for the interview as Dynamite Canyon.

His resolution was quietly taken, however,

and he went out and walked rapidly away from the village. For a while his course was toward the canyon; but at the end of a few minutes he turned abruptly to the left.

For a time his object was uncertain; but the cabin of Miss Deane soon arose before him, and he cautiously approached the window from which shone a light. It was the kitchen, and when he looked inside he saw both Lida and the mulatto. She was quietly sewing, while Goliath, with a revolver resting on the table, seemed like a gladiator on guard.

The sport smiled quietly and retreated.

"As I thought!" he muttered. "The note was a forgery. Lida had nothing to do about it. Now, who is it wishes to decoy me to Dynamite Canyon? Probably the name is a trifle like Parker Clifton, and, if so, I don't want to disappoint him. Of course, somebody has laid plans to send me over the divide, and it seems mean to upset their little game, but I can't always be lofty minded. I'll answer the call, just to see to whom I owe it, and if there is to be any shooting done, I'll come in on the upbeat."

All this while he was hurrying away, but he did not intend to be so reckless as appearances indicated. He meant to play trick for trick; he would be looked for at the lower end of the canyon, and by passing over the ridge and coming down, he would take them in the rear.

This plan he proceeded to carry out, and he soon stood on the wall of the deep mountain cut to which was given the name before mentioned.

He paused and looked down. The night was not so dark but he could see the bottom of the canyon, but at no point could he see human beings. Doubtless they were hiding in the deepest shadows and awaiting their victim.

It was no easy, or safe, matter to descend the cliff, but he began operations at once and was soon moving down, hanging to the points of rock and maintaining his usual coolness.

His courage was destined to be well tested before the trip was over, however.

He was about half-way down when a dull report arose from the bottom of the canyon and a peculiar *chug!* sounded near his head.

To his practiced ears it was easily understood, and he suddenly paused and looked down. Some one had fired at him with hostile intentions, and further journeying would be accompanied by extreme danger.

Would the shot be repeated? He had an unpleasant suspicion that it would, and as there was a crevice in the face of the rock, only a few feet away, he made for what would be a degree of shelter.

He had barely touched the cleft when the dull report again sounded, but this time the bullet sped wide of the mark.

The adventurer coolly got down, drew his revolver and peered down the canyon.

"Keep it up, old man!" he muttered, "and when the next volley comes I'll try to do my part. It's long range for a revolver, but if you can stand it, I can, and I'll try to give a good account of myself!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE DUEL IN DYNAMITE CANYON.

HORSESHOE HANK's position was far from being an enviable one, for, had his enemies possessed a rifle, he must soon have been shot through. His shelter was far from being adequate, and he was situated very much as though he was a target set up for the occasion.

There was, however, no way to better his position at once. Should he attempt to move up or down the cliff, it would inevitably increase his danger, for a wound, slight though it was, might cause him to drop to certain death.

Several minutes passed, but there was no further demonstration from the unknown. The dark shadows hid him from view, and he seemed to have given up his target-shooting, but Hank grimly resolved that he would yet know who he was. The man could not leave the niche unseen by him, and if the light held he would outwit him if it took until morning.

With his cocked revolver ready for use, Hank waited and watched, but the minutes wore on and there was no further sign from the marksman.

Hank was still sitting very coolly when matters took a new and unexpected turn. Something dropped over his head, and then the noose of a lasso tightened around his neck.

Whoever were working against him had laid their plans well, but they had neglected to take into consideration the character of the man they had lassoed. He realized his danger and moved with startling quickness.

Flinging up both hands, he caught the lasso above his head and gave it a quick, hard jerk.

The result surprised even himself.

The lasso slackened and then dropped down, while at the same moment a dark object shot over the edge of the cliff and, turning over and over, revealed the form of a man as it went down to certain destruction.

There was a moment of suspense—a dull thud—and then followed utter silence.

Hank had barely saved himself from falling when he so unexpectedly jerked the unknown

over the cliff, but his nerves had never been better and, as the lasso dangled about his neck, he suddenly conceived a new idea.

Hastily removing it, he transferred the noose to a point of rock which seemed just fitted for it, and not likely to cut it in two, and then boldly swung himself clear of the shelf and, with one leg twined around the lasso, began hastily sliding down.

It seemed the height of recklessness, for his support might part at any point, but his rapid movements gave it but brief time to chafe apart, and he went sliding down successfully.

He had resolved on prompt action and, the moment he touched the ground, he darted toward the alcove which sheltered the late marksman. He was by no means ignorant of the danger he was daring, for a well-directed shot would forever end his career, but he argued that the fate which had overtaken the marksman's ally would have a demoralizing effect on the survivor, and he had before seen such rushes result favorably.

The shot he expected did not come, however, and as he dashed into the recess, he failed to see any one there.

He paused and looked around in bewilderment. His gaze had been turned away only for a brief time while sliding down the lasso, and he could almost have sworn the unknown had not escaped.

But where was he then?

The sport directed his gaze up the face of the cliff. At that point it was so steep that climbing seemed impossible, but as he looked up a small stone rattled down and fell almost at his feet.

It was not necessary to direct his attention, for, plainly enough, he now saw a human figure fifty feet above. At first glance it seemed almost suspended in the air, or a protuberance of the rock, for it was hard to see how foothold was obtained, but Hank was of a practical nature and not inclined to believe in the supernatural—especially after so earthly a revolver had been fired at his precious head.

He threw up his own revolver at once.

"Halt, there!" he shouted.

There was no reply.

"I say, my gentle friend, did you hear me speak?"

The question was as useless as the first, and the unknown remained as still as though a part of the cliff.

"Perhaps you think I am talking just to develop my lung-power," continued the Man of Big Luck, sharply, "but you want to get the notion out of your head. You have had two shots at me, and I'm going to take my turn if you don't come down. My six covers you, and I can't miss at this distance if I would. Come down, or absorb a thirty-two-caliber. What do you say?"

"Don't fire!"

The words were borne to his ears, and, simple as they seemed, he started. It was not what was said, but the fact that the voice was low, tremulous and, beyond a doubt, that of a female; and as the sport's eyes became more accustomed to the darkness, he could see the dress was keeping with the voice.

"Great Scott! what have I treed?" he thought, in amazement; but he was not one to long lose his presence of mind, and though he suspected the identity of the woman, he assumed a new tone.

"I hope there won't be any necessity for firing, miss, but I'm an awful set man in my way, and when I say, 'Come down!' I mean just that and nothing short. I'll walk over to the other side of the niche and, turning my gaze skyward, look at Jupiter while Venus comes down."

It was a fair proposal, but the lady seemed inclined to demur.

"Let me alone!" she said, sharply.

"Bless and save us, miss, I'm not touching you. I'm no india-rubber man, nor is my arm a telescope, that I can develop it to the degree of reaching fifty feet."

"I will not descend!" she declared.

"Oh! yes, you will."

"I say I will not!"

"Yes? Well, then I shall have to bring you down as I would a mountain-sheep. Luckily, I am a good shot in the dark, and I'll bet my hat I can drop you first trial."

He made a pretense of getting ready, and the sharp click of the revolver produced an immediate effect.

"Stop!" she cried, with a truly feminine shriek.

"Very sorry, but I haven't time. When I say 'three,' I shall fire. One! two—"

"Stop!" she again cried, but in a different tone. "I will descend."

"That's solid horse sense, miss, and I begin to admire you; I do, upon my word!"

"You are a coward, a base coward. No other person would thus persecute a woman."

"I am too cowardly to sit upon the other side of the canyon and let you blaze away at me with a revolver. Lead is mighty bad for the blood, and—"

The Man of Big Luck was talking carelessly, and one would have said he had eyes and ears

only for the woman, who was slowly descending, but his remarks suddenly ended and he wheeled like a flash.

The bed of the canyon was more gravel than earth on the surface, and he had heard the sound of hasty footsteps. Believing that reinforcements had come for the woman, he whirled about with a revolver in each hand and presented them like a flash.

At least three dark forms were visible at the entrance to the alcove, and his voice rung out at once.

"Halt, there! This is a private matinee; no foreigners need apply!"

"Help! help!" cried the woman, shrilly.

"Keep back, or you are dead men!"

The last words were uttered in a tone which left no doubt of the sport's earnestness, and the strangers did not fail to obey. One spoke, however, and his voice was firm.

"What's going on hyar?"

"This ruffian is trying to murder me!" cried the cliff-climber.

"Gents, you perceive that a man can't use his tongue with the celerity of a woman, but as I see you are not friends of hers, I beg that you'll let me come in on the second stanza, and you will find I'm solid on time and tune. This young woman has tried to kill me; she took two shots at me with her revolver, and her ally tried to lasso me. I played my best cards and the ally is out of the game for good, but I now want to know who the woman is. I don't want to harm her—"

The Man of Big Luck had spoken steadily, despite the fact that the woman several times tried to interrupt him, and, as he had a strong voice, he seemed likely to win the oration, but she saw the danger to her cause and tried a new way.

Crack!

The report of a revolver sounded hollowly in the recess, and one of Hank's weapons fell from his hand. The bullet meant for his head had done some harm after all, and it seemed to stir up the new-comers. They did not understand the trouble, but their sympathies were with the woman, and though it was she who fired the shot, they accepted it as proof that Hank was a villain.

"Forrud, pardns!" cried one of them, and the rush began.

"Back!"

The sport shouted the one word in a ringing voice, but it failed to have any effect, and the trio came on. Hank was reluctant to fire, for they might be honest, but mistaken, men of the town; but as he could not stand still and be slain, he prepared for the worst.

Crack!

Again a revolver spoke, and this time it was one of the strangers who fired. The Man of Big Luck felt a stinging sensation along his side and knew it would not do to hesitate longer. His life was of some importance to himself, if not to any one else.

He had clung to one of his revolvers through all, and presenting it at a level with the legs of the strangers, he blazed away as fast as possible.

In a moment more the alcove was transformed to a miniature battle-field, and as the sport pressed against the cliff and operated his Smith & Wesson regularly, he found lead flying all around him, and knew the woman was aiding the new-comers to make matters hot for him.

His prospects looked dark, indeed!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

DANDELION DAN SEES A GHOST.

It is by no means easy to use a revolver with accuracy in the night-time, and though the bullets whistled around Hank in profusion, and some of them left their mark, he did not at once receive a severe wound.

The assailants fared worse.

With so broad a mark as three men abreast, the Man of Big Luck could not very well miss entirely, and one of them went down with a broken leg.

At this critical moment another man dashed into the recess, and his voice rung out loudly:

"Balance yer pardners; all hands around. Make room fur ther Dancin' Daisy!"

It was a most welcome sound to Horseshoe Hank's ears, and his own voice arose like an echo.

"This way, Dandelion Dan! Room for the Colorado Pards!"

The moment was as exhilarating as the bugle-blast of victory, and the "Colorado Pards" sprung forward together. There was a collision; a sound of clashing steel, sturdy blows, shouts and yells, and then the fever of battle receded, and Hank and his friend stood victors with the strangers at their mercy.

Neither took advantage of the chance to act relentlessly, and the vanquished men were prompt to assert that they "caved," and wanted no more fighting.

"So be it, my gallant galoots!" cheerfully answered the Man of Big Luck. "You deserve a lesson for chipping in without catching on to the rights of the case; but I am not the man to hit a fellow when he's down, and— No, you don't!"

He made a sudden spring toward one side.

There was a brief struggle, and then he returned, holding the woman in the case by the arm. She had tried to take advantage of the fight and glide away unseen, but Hank's eyes were too keen for that, and she must now face the music she had caused.

"Mira Garrett!" the sport coolly observed. "I supposed as much, and I must say you are getting to be decidedly waspish. See to it, my beauty, that you don't attempt my life once too often. You are a woman, and it isn't my way to war against the sex; but when I get on my ear I'm a man-o'-war on the shoot!"

The woman did not answer, but he could see that her bosom arose and fell rapidly with suppressed emotion, and he knew it was a bitter moment for her.

He turned to the men and asked who they were, and their replies convinced him they were honest men, after all. They had gone into the fight without having learned the merits of the case, but not one had escaped without some injury, and, as has been said, one had a broken leg.

It did not take Hank long to come to an understanding with them; perhaps it was the fact that they were so thoroughly whipped that influenced them; but at the end of five minutes they confessed that they had had enough of it, that they believed him in the right, and that they were more than willing to draw out of the affair, at once and forever.

The whole affair was soon amicably arranged and, after confessing they made fools of themselves, and thanking Hank for the mercy shown them, they went away to get a litter on which to carry their wounded comrade back to the town.

All this while Mira had stood sullenly in the sport's grasp. Convinced that resistance would be in vain, she did not attempt it further, but resigned herself with an ill grace to the fate she could not avoid.

Her captor led her from the room, followed by Dan.

"Mira," said the Man of Big Luck, soberly, "I think you will live to rue this night's work."

"Do your worst; I defy you!" she panted.

"You mistake my meaning. I shall not lift a finger to take revenge on you, though the blood is trickling down my body from at least three wounds; I do not war on women. What I mean is that your conscience will yet reproach you."

"For attacking you? Never!"

"We will see. Why do you wish me dead?"

"For the same reason you wish me dead."

"I don't wish you dead and you know it. Let me answer my own question. It is because you fear I will harm the man with whom you fled when you deserted me. Rest easy; Ross Gilmore is safe from me. Recent events have decided me never to lift a hand against him personally, but I am sure he will be arrested and punished for his share in the Golden Brick swindle. Enough of this, however; let me speak of ourselves:

"To-night you sent me a decoy letter, a craftily planned trap into which you hoped I would walk. I did nothing of the kind, for I have learned to watch for such dangers, but the turn of affairs placed me in several difficulties. You, on your part, have fired five or six shots at me."

He paused, but there was no answer.

"This sort of thing must be stopped!" he more sternly added. "I am not a target for Tom, Dick and Harry to blaze away at, and as I am not persecuting you, you ought to let me alone. You must! Once and for all, if I catch you playing a trick on me again, I'll show you the tiger has claws!"

Harshly his voice rung out, and the grip on her arm was vise-like, and her sullenness gave place to terror.

"In Heaven's name, don't kill me!" she exclaimed.

"Kill you!" he contemptuously answered. "Do you suppose I would stain my hands with blood, for such a woman as you? No! Once, I loved you, Mira; you know that as well as I do; but now not so much as ashes remain of the old love. You and I are done forever; I am going my way and you can go yours; but beware how you meddle with me. You have had several chances at my life and scored as many failures. Now, give it up forever. Come, I wish to see who your ally was before his fall from the cliff."

Still holding her arm he led the way to the bed of the canyon. There lay the man who had tried to lasso Hank, with such disastrous results to himself.

Dandelion Dan struck a match and held it above the set, white face.

"Gravel Joe!" exclaimed the sport.

Gravel Joe it was, or, at least, all that was mortal of him, for the fall had instantly dashed life from his body.

Had he remained firm in his expressed resolution to let the Man of Big Luck alone in the future it would have been better for him, but he had been over-persuaded by Mira, and Dynamite Canyon had had its tragedy after all, though the victim was scarcely the man marked for death.

Hank did not feel like mourning him, nor was it likely any one else would, but he improved the chance to impress Mira further and, though she expressed no remorse, she was soon shaking with fear.

When he had said enough he bade her depart. She improved the chance at once and glided away in the darkness. Hank and Dan were left alone.

"Pard," said the former, extending his hand, "you came into the game just in time, and that I'm not worse hurt is owing to you."

"Oh! I reckon you would hav laid them all over; but when I heerd ther music I couldn't resist ther temptation ter j'ine ther dance. I didn't know at ther fust ye was in it; but it happens jest right."

"How did you happen around?"

"Somebody said you hed gone this way, an' I waltzed arter ye. How's yer wondws?"

"Mere trifles; but we will now go back to the hotel and care for them."

They went, and after making a statement of the late fight, went to their rooms. The sport's injuries were indeed slight, and after dressing them, he went to bed, thinking that sleep would be a sufficient medicine.

Dandelion Dan sat down at the open window of his room and began to smoke. His pipe was his best friend, and under its soothing influences he soon forgot the troubles of the evening, and became calm and contented. Gradually, too, slumber stole over him, and objects grew indistinct; he closed his eyes, and for a few minutes was wholly unconscious of what was transpiring around him.

While he slept he dreamed, and he thought an immense serpent, at least a hundred feet long, came crawling down from the mountain, across the level and to the hotel, after which it crawled upon the roof of the shed, or lean-to, which was under his window, and moved slowly upon him, while he sat fascinated and unable to move. It was a moment of horror; but just as the reptile touched his face he bounded to his feet—and awoke.

The serpent was not there, and he knew it had been a dream; but something else was which frightened Dandelion Dan as much a boa-constrictor would have done.

Upon the roof of the shed stood a figure clad all in white, and though Dan had never before seen anything of the kind "he knew it was a ghost, ther fust squint he tuk," as he afterward expressed it. If such it was, it was the disembodied spirit of a woman of middle age, with a pale, mournful face, and a profusion of black hair which strayed over her face in irregular waves.

The blood of the Dancing Daisy seemed to turn to ice, and he would have arisen and fled had not he been as "fascinated" as he had dreamed he was by the serpent.

The ghost was looking him full in the face, and he stood motionless and horror-stricken.

A terrible pause followed, and then the ghost extended one hand, and spoke.

"Will you come with me?" she asked, in a sepulchral voice which still further alarmed Dan.

"I—I'd druther not!" he stammered.

"I want you."

"Great Cicero!" thought the Dancing Daisy, "she wants ter take me ter ghost-land afore I'm defunct!"

But the prospect of such a calamity stirred him into new life, and he answered:

"I'm sure I'm very much obligeed; but I've got an engagement, and can't leave."

"But I want a brave man, and you look—"

"No, I don't—I mean, I ain't. I'm the biggest coward that ever trod Idaho s'ile. I'm afeerd o' my own shadder, an' I shook out three front teeth in a skeer last week when a boy 'leven year old threatened ter lick me. I ain't no 'chief,' nur I ain't on ther shoot, nur my muskle, nur nuthin' cept ther skeer. I hev a chronic affection o' ther kneeses which makes them wobble whenever I see blood in anybody's eye."

"This is the modesty of a brave man, I am sure," replied the ghost. "I have traveled far to find such a person, and I am certain you are the right man!"

And she stretched out one hand again, as though to grasp him.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE MIDNIGHT VISITOR.

"HOLD on! hold on!" exclaimed Dan, while a cold sweat broke out over his body. "Don't do that; I ain't fit ter go. Give me time ter repent!"

"I don't understand," said the ghost, in a puzzled voice.

"I'm a desp'ritly wicked man," said the Dancing Daisy, warming to his subject. "I've committed nigh about ev'ry crime known to man, I've did time in thirty-six prisons, on sentences runnin' from one ter twenty years each, an' my pictur' hangs in ev'ry rogues' galaxy from Maine ter 'Frisco. Is sech a man fit ter die?"

"You are not to die. I only want you to go with me for an hour or so."

"Shall we fly?"

"Fly?"

"Yas; fur I ain't got no wings. an' I don't think they would grow on sech a desp'rit villain ez me, an' ef we should put them on with Spalding's glue, same ez Iscariot did when he flew over the Ragin Sea, they'd melt, same ez his did."

"How strangely you talk. No; we shall not fly; we shall walk. And we have but a few steps to go. Won't you please come with me and help me?"

"She's is a good-natured ghost," thought Dan, "an' I reckon ther best way is ter humor her, fur I'm dead-gone in her power. She kin gobble me right up ez she sees fit. Yas, I'll go, Lord! Lord! whoever thought I'd go ter walk with a ghost!"

He was too much frightened to think of making a dash to escape, and had he thought of it he would have rejected it as a mad idea, for ghosts are supposed to be able to go anywhere, so he tremblingly announced his decision and crept out of the window to the roof of the lean-to.

This slanted to a point where it was easy to descend, and Dan and the ghost were soon on firm land. He glanced back once at the hotel, which he never expected to see again, and vainly wished for the aid of H'rseshoe Hank.

"Come!" said the ghost.

He went, and they passed several cabins in silence. The hour was so late that few were astir, for Stonewall Bend was not one of those reckless towns where law and order are dead letters, but this solitude only added to Dan's misery.

He would have hailed the worst bummer of the village as a friend and brother—provided he shared the danger.

The ghostly guide led the way in silence until, at last, they paused before one of the largest buildings of the town.

Dan recognized it as the house of Parker Clifton.

"This is our destination," said the guide.

"What are we goin' ter do?"

"Follow me, and you shall see."

They turned the corner and she pointed to a heavy ladder which was lying on the ground.

"Raise that and place it near the second window above. It was so heavy I could not do so."

Dan had decided that zeal in his duties would do him no harm, so he proceeded to carry out the order at once.

"Are you ready to stand by me?" she asked.

"Ter ther death! That is—hold on!—I mean I'll do it while my toe-nails hang on. You've showed a degree o' confidence in me which does me proud, an' I hain't goin' ter take water fur no common galoot. You kin bet yer last red!"

The Dancing Daisy had arrived at a reckless pitch, and had the woman invited him to go to ghost-land he would have consented, if she would pay the fare and the admission fee.

"Then follow me!"

She went lightly up the ladder and he followed closely after. When the window was reached she raised the lower sash and crawled through, and both were soon in a dark room.

"We must be very careful now and make no noise," she added.

"Sart'in we must, marm, an' I'll step ez though walkin' on aigs. You kin depend on me, fur I never shake a pard nor leave ther floor till ther figger is done an' ther music outwinded."

The ghost was busy for a moment, and then Dan heard a door open.

"I am about to enter his room," she continued, "and I want you to remain just outside and watch. If there is trouble, you will come to my rescue, won't you?"

"Sart'in, marm; ef that is any row, you jest sing out: 'All hands around!' an' I'll sail in an' bu'st ther nose o' ther fiddler an' break up ther dance."

"Enough! Now, be careful that you are not discovered."

They went into a hall and Dan saw a ray of light which, at one point, shone under a door. This door she opened, and the Dancing Daisy had barely obtained a glimpse of Parker Clifton seated at a table, writing, when she passed through, leaving the door a little ajar.

Clifton glanced up quickly, and a look of amazement overspread his face as he saw her. He arose, but he still stared in silence. Clearly, he did not recognize her.

On her part, she stood and looked at him with those mournful eyes before mentioned, and as silent as he, but the pause was really but brief.

"Who in perdition are you?" he demanded, in astonishment.

"A most unhappy woman!" she replied.

"You look like it, by Judas! But why are you in my room, how did you get here, and who in blazes are you?"

"I have come to see you, and my name is Leah, the Forsaken," she answered.

"What rubbish is this?" Clifton harshly demanded.

"I am not talking at random, sir: I have come to ask you for my boy."

"Your boy! I haven't him, nor any other boy. Do you take this for an orphan asylum? This is a pretty hour to make a visit. How did

you get in? I'll call my servant and have you thrown out!"

"Ha! ha!" chuckled Dan. "Clif don't see she's a spook. Let him call his servant. Reckon Wah Ho will find her a wuss an-ta-go-nist than Hank was!"

Clifton had started for the door, but Leah put out one hand and he stopped.

"I will not delay you long, sir; I merely wanted to ask you for my boy. His name is Locke Bassett!"

The plotter started.

"Locke Basset!" he repeated, in a changed voice.

"Ay, sir, my son, Locke. You remember him; he was the confidential clerk of the Queen Mary mine, at Beeswax Flat. I have not seen him for many long months, and I have come to you for him—I, his mother!"

Clifton looked at her keenly.

"Why do you come to me?" he asked.

"Because you were the head of the firm, and I am sure you know where he now is. Lizzie and I have come to Stonewall Bend to find him."

"Lizzie? Is that the girl who calls herself Lida Deane?"

"Yes, sir, but her real name is Lizzie Bassett."

"And you are her mother—and the mother of Locke?"

"Yes, sir."

Clifton's face was less stern than usual. He perceived that the woman was not right mentally, and something like a ray of pity was expressed on his features. Callous as was his nature, the sorrows of the deranged had an effect upon him.

"I do not know where your son is, Mrs. Bassett," he replied.

"I heard Lizzie tell Goliath that he had been living here under the name of Ross Gilmore, and that he had gone away. Don't you know where he is?"

"No. He has gone away, as you say, but I haven't the slightest idea where he has gone."

"I will wait here until he returns, then."

And Leah deliberately sat down.

Clifton looked at her with a scowl.

"That won't do, my good woman," he said. "Bassett may not come at all, and I can't have you here, in any case. Return to your daughter and let her manage matters. I hope you will succeed in finding him, but I cannot help you. I wouldn't, if I could!"

The last observation was made after a pause, and somewhat viciously, for he saw that she evinced no sign of going, and he wanted none of Locke Bassett's relatives around. They seemed unusually numerous and persistent, and all seemed resolved to make him answerable for the man who had stolen ten thousand dollars from him and absconded.

For a moment he was tempted to at once eject the woman himself, but a new idea occurred to him. Lida Deane, with the giant mulatto at her back, was a dangerous enemy, and it occurred to him that if he had her mother in his power he would be able to dictate terms.

With Goliath and Horseshoe Hank for protectors, she would probably be able to meet open attacks in the future as she had done in the past.

"Did your daughter send you here?" he asked.

"No, sir; she does not know I came."

"I have never seen you at her cabin."

"That is because I live in a cave."

"You do?"

"Yes. When we first came here we lived for a few days in the cave, and I became attached to it, and would not leave when the cabin was built."

"I see. Are you sure they did not see you leave the cave?"

"They were not there. They were at the cabin, and I came out to your house without their knowledge."

This settled Clifton's mind, and he resolved that she should not leave the house. Lida would have no means of knowing where she had gone, and when the girl proceeded to open hostilities against him, he would have a trump card with which to meet her.

"Well, Mrs. Bassett," he said, in a bland voice, "I will do all I can to find Locke. I hope you will remain here over night?"

"Oh, no, sir; I could not think of that. I am contented nowhere except at the cave, and must return there."

She at once showed alarm and arose, but Clifton was ready for the emergency.

"Just as you say, madam. I will call my Chinaman and have him show you out."

"No, no; I do not want his help. I can find my way alone; and Lizzie says he is a wicked man."

She turned abruptly toward the door, but Clifton caught her arm.

"Not so fast, my fine lady!" he exclaimed. "You have come here uninvited, but I like your company so well that you have got to stay!"

There was a cruel ring in his voice, and he meant all he said; but just then something

cold touched his temple, and a new voice broke in:

"It takes three ter make this bargain, mister, an' you can't dance on my pardner's toes. Take water, or take lead!"

CHAPTER XXX.

ROSS GILMORE'S LETTER.

DURING the preceding conversation Dandilion Dan had had a chance to recover from his fright and use his brains, and as a result he came to the conclusion that "Leah" was not so much of a ghost as he at first believed.

Horseshoe Hank had told him something about the woman of the cave, who was also Lida Deane's mother, and realized the truth at last, and began to be ashamed that he had let his superstitious fears so long sway him.

More than this, he had the astuteness to suspect Clifton's motive in wishing to detain the woman, and he resolved to improve the chance to help the mother of a girl he respected, and whom he suspected Hank regarded with more than respect.

Therefore, he suddenly appeared on the scene with the words recorded at the end of the previous chapter.

Clifton wheeled suddenly, but he found the reality fully as bad as the anticipation. There stood Dan, his powerful form seeming colossal to the elder man's frightened gaze, and a revolver presented a thirty-two caliber close to his nose.

"I'm all hyar," continued the Dancing Daisy, as Clifton did not speak; "an' you'll find me ther boss waltzer o' ther revelry by night ef you run ag'in' me. Don't go fur ter call that snuff-colored baboon from Chian, or Anam, or wharever Wah Ho chewed his fust rat—I say, don't do it!"

Clifton's surprise was over, but upon his face there rested an expression of both consternation and rage.

"You dog!" he exclaimed, "how dared you come here?"

"Can't prezactly explain it, old man, but I s'pose I got a hip-lock somehow on my nat'rally timid an' retirin' disposition. I feel like retirin' now, an' with yer permission ther woman an' I will go out."

"You can't go. I don't allow people to break into my house at such an hour with impunity. Wah Ho, this way!"

Dan bounded forward like a tiger and caught the speaker by the throat.

"Not a word!" he exclaimed. "I hain't in a position ter stand on ceremony, an' ef you squeal I'll make you sick. Call that Celestial outang-orang, will ye! By ther piper! ef ye do I'll give him his last sickness. You hear me! I won't stand any foolishin'; we're goin' out an' it won't be healthy for any galoot o' yer size ter say no!"

His tone and the pressure of his strong fingers were enough to dampen Clifton's ardor. He saw that he had to deal with a man of extraordinary nerve, as well as extraordinary strength, and he resolved to make the best of a bad matter.

"Release me!" he gasped, as Dan slackened his hold. "I abandon my position, and you may go as soon as you see fit."

Dan looked at him keenly.

"No, ye don't," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"You are anxious fur ter know whar is ther cave whar this woman lives, an' ther minute we was cl'ar o' ther house you would sot ther heathen Chinee on our trail an' run us down. It won't work. We don't want Wah Ho in ther game an' you must accompany us to ther Deane cabin!"

"By Judas! I'll do nothing of the kind!"

"By Iscariot! you will!"

"This is an indignity!"

"What word will fit yer attempt ter keep ther woman ag'in' her will? Oh! you slimy, forked-tongued serpent o' ther garding o' Idaho, you can't raise a blister on my back!"

If the last part of Dan's remarks was vague, his general meaning was very clear, and Clifton saw that he had got to yield or fare worse. It would not be a very severe punishment to accompany them to the Deane cabin, and he announced that he was ready to go.

Leah had looked on during this quarrel with what seemed calm confidence in her champion, and she took all as a matter of course. Clifton put on his hat and they left the house by the same means the uninvited visitors had entered; and as they went down the ladder, it occurred to Dan that he owed his participation in the night's events to the fact that the woman had at first found the ladder too heavy for her to raise alone. She had gone in search of help, but it was mere chance that she selected Dan as her ally.

They left the house and proceeded at once to the cabin in the gulch. When near the door, Dan, who, like Clifton, had preserved utter silence during the journey, turned to the unwilling traveler.

"You're at liberty ter p'int yer toes toward home an' amble, but let me whisper a word in yer ear. Better let up on 'ny plans you may

hev, or one o' these days thar'll be a crash an' you'll be reckoned among ther defunct."

"I don't ask for your advice, fellow!"

"Wal, you've got it, all ther same, an' it's like Sidlitz powder; mighty good if you can keep it down!"

Clifton did not answer, but with a set and angry face, strode away toward his house.

"I will have revenge on the whole crew!" he was thinking, furiously. "Horseshoe Hank, this big ruffian, Lida Deane—each and all have defied and threatened me, and I'll have my revenge. I swear it!"

Another day dawned upon Stonewall Bend, giving little evidence of the wild scenes enacted during the night in and around the town. The man with the broken leg was as comfortable as could be expected; Gravel Joe, of whom no one knew anything more than his sobriquet, was to be buried in the afternoon; Leah had been returned to her old quarters and the entrance so secured that she could not wander out again; and the Man of Big Luck and his partner were seen at the hotel, as usual.

The forenoon was drawing to an end when Francis Nelson approached Clifton's house and, when the door was opened in obedience to his summons, inquired for Stella. He was soon in her presence and was kindly received, though without any warmth.

"I have come to see you on business, Miss Clifton," he said, abruptly, "and I have reasons for approaching the subject at once. In the first place, I am going to leave Stonewall Bend."

"Indeed! Isn't this a sudden resolution?"

"To a certain degree, yes; but I have no business ties here, and I am able to go at any time."

"Perhaps you are going in search of Ross?" and she looked at him closely.

"That would be of no use. Experienced detectives are on his track, and my puny efforts would amount to nothing, as I may say. Besides," he added, hurriedly, "I am about to do that which will erect an impassable barrier between Ross Gilmore and myself, and make future association impossible."

"What are you going to do?" she demanded, quickly, her whole manner betraying the fact that she realized that something of importance was coming.

Nelson passed his hand nervously over his face.

"You will remember, Miss Clifton, that when you reproached me for not speaking plainly about Ross, I declared that I was sincerely your friend."

"Yes."

"I am going to prove it, but, by so doing, I shall deal Ross a blow in the back, métaphorically speaking—a blow which seems to me to be a most cowardly one—but the deed shall be done and then I will leave Stonewall Bend forever, and see neither you nor him. Last night I was requested by the owner of the hotel to take charge of certain things in Ross's room, which were deemed of no value by any one else, or they would be destroyed. Of course I went, with the intention of storing them until his fate was sealed, and among them I found a letter. This letter I have brought to you."

Nelson spoke rapidly, as though anxious to get a disagreeable duty off his hands, giving her no chance to interrupt, but his very manner was indicative of an unpleasant ending.

Stella had become pale, but that strength of character before noted enabled her to retain her calmness.

"Let me see it," she steadily answered.

He extended a folded paper which she spread out. On one side was writing in a delicate, feminine hand, and this was what she read:

"MY DEAR ROSS:—I have but a moment in which to write, for your messenger is waiting, but I must acknowledge the receipt of the kind note you sent. I was so disappointed because you did not come last night, and afraid you were at the house of that other woman, but your explanation makes all right. Be sure and come to-night. I hope we may be able to throw off the vail before long, leave the Bend and be happy. Arrange money matters as soon as you can, and then—we will defy the world!"

"Your devoted MIRA."

Stella read to the end, almost without a change of expression, but when the last word had been reached, the note fluttered from her hands to the floor.

"It is finished!" she said.

There was a world of pathos and sorrow in her voice, but Francis did not answer and several seconds of silence followed. It was Stella who spoke first.

"I thank you, Mr. Nelson, for having discharged what I can well understand must have been a painful duty, and thus enlightened me on this important point. From this hour, Ross Gilmore and I are strangers, and I do not care how soon the law has him in charge."

She spoke bravely, but, all the while, was conscious that she was far from being so. Still, her course was natural.

"You really approve of my course?" questioned Nelson, anxiously.

"I really do, and I thank you sincerely. You can always rely on my friendship."

"You forget I am going away," he sadly replied.

"But we shall meet again."

"I am not so sure of that. I think it will be best—But, never mind; I am going too far. You understand my feelings as well as I do, and may comprehend that it is for my safety I leave here. Pardon me, but I felt that you must know."

He spoke hurriedly and somewhat vaguely, but only the idea last advanced impressed Stella.

"Am I driving you away?" she asked, with a sigh.

"You? Great heavens, no; it is my fate. You are not to be blamed that I have met and loved you, nor will I allow a shadow to rest on your mind. It was your goodness of heart, your beauty and intelligence, Miss Clifton, and to see was to worship. But, to-night, the wild, mad dream ends, and I only ask that you will think of me with kindness."

CHAPTER XXXI.

RUFORD DEFINES HIS POSITION.

STELLA listened patiently to this speech, though appearances indicated that she would much rather it had not been made. As she had before said, she felt that the love of such a man as Francis Nelson was an honor, but, not being anxious for conquests, and feeling that it was a poor time for a declaration, she would rather it had been left unsaid.

Yet, Nelson's air of nervous sadness revealed his mental condition, and she knew from her own experience that he was to be pitied.

"Believe me, Francis," she replied, "I am not unmindful of what you have done for me; I can see the mental struggle through which you must have passed before you decided to reveal Mr. Gilmore's real character. I shall never forget it, but it seems to me I shall ill repay it if I let you go away without a word. It is my wish that you remain at the Bend for a while."

His face brightened for a moment, and then became calm again.

"If I can help you, I certainly will," he answered.

"I am not sure you can, but it seems to me there is more trouble in store for me. My father is greatly changed. He is, at times nervous and irritable, and given to periods of meditation so deep that an ordinary remark will not arouse him. He seems to be brooding over the loss of the money Ross took away—or he may have heard those unjust insinuations of some people that he was a party to his partner's flight—and I fear the worst."

"Surely, not that he will do himself harm?"

"Perhaps he will; I don't know as to that. But it is clear that his mind is no longer what it was, and it may be I shall soon be deprived of my father."

Her eyes filled with tears, and Nelson impulsively laid his hand on hers, and then suddenly withdrew it.

"I am sorry," he said, and though the words were simple, there was sincere sympathy expressed in them. "Now, pardon me, but if you have the slightest idea that I may become of service to you, through anything which may occur, I shall be glad to remain in town."

His face was sympathetic and respectful, and, looking at him, Stella could not but think that he would be a rock of protection in case anything serious did occur.

"I prefer that you remain," she answered, giving him her hand, and he could not hide the gleam of joy in his dark eyes.

He did not linger much longer, for his work was done for the time, and Stella was soon left alone.

She fell into deep thought, the chief subject whereof was Francis Nelson. Her faith in Ross Gilmore had that day received a deadly blow. She could stand up for him, with all a woman's loyalty—and what is more steadfast?—when he was accused of ordinary business misdemeanors, and sincerely believe him innocent; but what woman can, or should, continue to love the man who has been proved the property of another woman?

"My future life seems wrecked, anyway, unless I can catch at some means of rescue. Francis is noble, kind and gentlemanly; he loves me truly, and would do his best to make me happy if I were his wife. Why should I not accept the protection of his strong arm—and forget Ross Gilmore?"

She had proceeded bravely until the last words; but they gave her a sharp pain which reminded her it was easier to resolve than to forget. The bright hours of the past, which she had lived in Gilmore's company, returned in recollection to her, and she passionately cried:

"He is not guilty—he is not! I will not believe it if all the world say so! Oh! Ross, Ross, what is the truth of this terrible case, and where are you? Oh, Heaven! where are you?"

At the last word she dropped into a chair, nervously weeping, and life had never looked so dark and dreary.

The sounds of her sobbing reached the ears of another man who was just entering the house—it was Ruford, the clerk—but he smiled sneeringly, and went on to Mr. Clifton's room. The latter seemed somewhat surprised to see him there; but he was pleasantly greeted, and invited to take a seat.

"I hope there is no trouble at the mine?"

"None, sir," Ruford answered. "I am pleased to say the Golden Brick is doing better than when Gilmore was here."

This was a covert compliment to his own management, and Clifton saw the point, and made a suitable reply.

"I have come on business to-day," resumed the clerk, "and I will proceed to state it at once. In the first place, I saw Nelson leaving the house just as I came in."

"Very likely; he is now Stella's chief sympathizer," said Clifton, with a sneer.

"Are you sure he is not more?"

"What do you mean?"

"It has occurred to me that perhaps Mr. Nelson aspires to fill the place left vacant by Gilmore; in brief, to become the husband of Miss Clifton."

"He had better not try it!" declared Stella's father. "I'll break his neck if I find him hanging around here. He is one of those goody-goody chaps whom I cordially detest, too sentimental to make a penny unless it is guaranteed honest by at least five influential citizens!"

"That's the size of it," agreed Mr. Ruford; who then devoted a proper length of time to working on Clifton's prejudices; but he had his objective point always in view, and soon arrived at it, by adding: "I am glad of it, for I am a candidate for Miss Clifton's hand myself."

The elder man looked at him in amazement.

"You?" he exclaimed.

"Yes."

"You are jesting."

"On the contrary, I am quite in earnest. Why not? The lady is certainly charming enough to fascinate any one, and as we are about of an age, it is natural I should think of it. Of course, I don't bring any great sum of money with me, but I am useful to you, and I flatter myself I can run the Golden Brick better than it has ever been run before. I therefore respectfully request permission to pay attention to your daughter."

"My dear fellow," said Clifton, in his blandest manner, "I am sorry to hear you say this. Stella's late essay in love has turned out so poorly that it is not likely she will let her mind wander in that direction again for some time, and I hope she will not. She is nearly ill from the grief brought upon her by that infernal Gilmore, and she needs rest and quiet."

"Certainly she does, sir, and I should not be so foolish as to press my suit at once. All I ask is your permission, for the present, and I will be circumspect enough to suit you, I assure you."

"But the girl does not care for you."

"True, but I intend to win her."

"It's impossible!" brusquely answered Clifton.

"Why so?"

"Because—Well, I prefer that she don't receive another lover."

"Never?"

"Well, after a year or two, if she takes a fancy to a man, I suppose it will be all right."

"I am willing to wait a year, or two years."

The persistence of his clerk irritated Clifton, and a somewhat protracted argument ensued. It gradually grew warmer until at last the elder man peremptorily bade Ruford to abandon the idea, at once and forever.

"Heretofore," answered the clerk, calmly, "I have always obeyed you without a word, but in this matter I must have a voice. I claim Stella as a reward for my services, and you will remember that I can make it unpleasant for you by telling what I know about the sale of the Golden Brick. What if I should tell men that the deed was stolen and burned by you?"

"In that case you would convict yourself—you stole it, not I."

"It was at your request, and if I explain matters the Golden Brick mine will go to Buckley, as sure as fate."

"You can prove nothing."

"Wrong, Mr. Clifton."

"What can you prove?"

"For one thing, I can produce the deed!" coolly replied Ruford, as he tipped back in his chair and insolently surveyed his partner in evil-doing.

"You can't so much as produce the ashes."

"That's where you make your big mistake, my dear sir. While helping you to feather your nest, I have been heavily in the poultry business on my own hook. It has always been your practice to look out for Number One, first of all, and I trust I am no dull pupil. When you came to me and suggested that I steal the deed, and substitute a useless paper in its place, I resolved to catch hold of the drag-rope myself. Mr. Clifton, the deed which you burned was a *fac-simile* of the original, but it was a forgery. The genuine article is now in my pocket!"

Ruford made this startling statement with an air which carried conviction, despite Clifton's

anxiety to doubt, and the mine-owner's face became pale with anger and dismay.

"It is false!" he managed to say. "The paper I burned had my signature."

"True, but it was a forgery. You will remember I myself drew up the deed. Very well; I made a copy, and when I had stolen the genuine one and was alone, I skillfully copied your signature and that of Gilmore. If you don't believe I am capable of it, I'll do so again. Then, when it was done, I brought you the forged document, which you burned. The genuine, as I before said, is now in my pocket."

"I defy you to produce it!" said Clifton, trembling with anger.

"You shall see it, but let me say that, though I am anxious to have our interview as friendly as possible, a movement on your part to destroy it will result disastrously. I am younger and stronger than you, and I will protect my property."

So saying, Ruford drew a folded paper from his pocket and spread it out before his companion's eyes.

It was to all appearances the genuine deed, and as Clifton's eyes rested upon his own signature, he realized that he had indeed been duped. He looked long and earnestly, and then raised his gaze to Ruford's face.

"You are a scoundrel, sir!" he exclaimed.

"I am hardly prepared to accept so severe a verdict, sir. I have only carried out your business principles and looked to my own interests. Besides, what do I ask? Money? No! All I ask is the hand of the woman I love. As her husband I intend to lead an upright, honest life, and make her happy. I await your answer, sir."

CHAPTER XXXII.

ANOTHER MISSING MAN.

IT did not require any protracted season of meditation for Clifton to see that he was in the toils. The man he had made the active agent of his little plot to swindle Buckley out of the Golden Brick had proved sharper than he had believed him, and the agent now had the means of ruining his employer.

If Ruford delivered the deed to Buckley, the latter could hold the mine against all claimants; while if the clerk should tell the truth about the matter, Clifton would not only be out ten thousand dollars, but his name would be spoken all through Idaho and Colorado as that of a swindler.

Visions of the inside of a prison-cell, too, arose vividly, and the rich man perceived that his best way was to compromise with the clerk. After all, he was just as likely to make a good husband for Stella as any other man; it would be a mere lottery, when she married, at the best, for one must summer and winter a man before he knows him; and Ruford was a shrewd and gentlemanly-appearing fellow.

Thinking thus, he yielded with as good grace as possible and told his clerk he might rely on him to give all honorable aid to help him win Stella, but their purpose must not be at once shown.

So far, all had gone well, but when the deed was referred to, a serious difficulty arose. Clifton wished it destroyed. Ruford gently insinuated that it was his pledge of his ally's good faith. Clifton pointed out the possibility that it would be lost and thus betray them. Ruford acknowledged the possibility, but he declared his belief that he was able to keep it safely—and he intended to do so.

Once more the mine-owner found himself on the losing side, but, seriously as he was opposed, he began to admire Ruford, and believed he had found just such a man as he had long needed to aid him in such of his transactions as needed good nerves, a level head and a silent tongue.

He said as much, and when they finally separated it was with a degree of good-will Ruford had not looked for when he came to the house.

He went away in triumph, confident that he would see the day when Stella would be Mrs. Ruford and he would have the handling of the Clifton money.

Of course she would mourn for Ross Gilmore for awhile, but if he was found alive it would be only to go into prison for a long term, and the clerk flattered himself his prospects were very good.

When he was gone Clifton started to see Stella, but he found her with a visitor, and so returned to his own room.

Who was the visitor?

It was one whose arrival had caused Stella some surprise for, looking up, she saw the face of Mira Garrett. Why had she come there? Clearly, not on any friendly visit, for the eyes which met Stella's had an angry flash which told of ill-concealed hatred.

"You seem surprised to see me," said Mira, viciously.

"I confess that I am," Stella replied.

"And not very well pleased."

"I hope I may be able to entertain you as well as you did me when I called on you," was the answer, calmly made, for Stella was recovering her self-possession quickly, as usual.

"That is immaterial to me, for I have come on business which can soon be transacted. You

don't seem to be crying your eyes out about Ross Gilmore."

"I leave that to his wife."

"Meaning me?"

"I make no assertions, but you know what the prevailing reports are, and I am satisfied you were something to him. Among his effects has been found a loving letter from you."

"Indeed! Well, what of it?"

"Nothing, except that it satisfied me on a point where you refused information."

"Oh! you are satisfied, are you? That shows how much love you had for Gilmore."

"We need not argue the point, but I trust I have sufficient self-respect not to continue to love a man who is proved to belong to another woman."

"And so you seek a new lover?"

"What do you mean?"

"Simply that there are reports concerning you, as well as me. I am not ignorant of the fact that you are setting your cap for Francis Nelson!"

The assertion was coarsely and impudently made, and though Stella was innocent of the charge, she felt the blood arise to her face with a swift rush.

"Allow me to ask why you resent such a thing?"

"Because it shows just how fickle and mean your nature is. You did your best to take Ross from me, and now, the moment he is gone, you seek a new gallant. You are a mere coquette!"

"Since you seem interested, I will deny the accusation. Mr. Nelson is nothing to me, nor will he ever be. But, granting that it was so, I fail to see your right to dictate to me. You were a party to Ross Gilmore's plot, when he pretended love for me to gain a stronger hold on my father, and as such you cannot expect me to think very kindly of you."

"Heaven knows I don't want you to!" said Mira, with a toss of her head. "I hate you and had just as soon you would know it. Furthermore, if it will be of any use to you, Ross Gilmore is my husband. We were legally married a year ago, and no power can take him away from me."

"I know of no one who wishes to."

"I'm not so sure of that. I suspect you have heard from him since he went away?"

Mira looked keenly at her companion.

"You are mistaken. I am happy to say I know nothing about him."

"I'll take that with a grain of allowance. At all events, you have used all your arts to take him away from me, and for that I mean to have my revenge. While we remain together, I will see that you have no lover. I will come between you, whoever he may be, and poison his mind. Mark that! I shall watch you and Francis Nelson, and if I find you really care for him, I will prevent your marrying him if it takes my own life!"

"You are at liberty to proceed as you see fit," said Stella, in disgust, as she rose, "but I must decline to stay here longer to listen to such unreasoning words. I advise you to go to your husband and remain there, watching him night and day. It is your place, not with me, and I do not care to see you again."

With these words, Stella hurried from the room, and as Mira could not very well remain to vent her hatred on the empty air, she rose and left the house.

The interview had been a most unpleasant one for Stella, but it had one important feature. Oppose the fancy of a young person and he, or she, is pretty sure to think more than ever about the person thus placed under a ban, and, thinking, learn to pity and love; and Stella's thoughts turned to Nelson as naturally as the needle of a compass to the north.

Why shouldn't she encourage him? He loved her and was a gentleman, she argued; what better had her future life in store for her than to try to reciprocate his love? Bitter as it seemed, she must bury her love for Ross Gilmore, but Nelson—

Well, time would prove how the die would turn.

The following morning Amos Buckley did not appear at the breakfast table, and when a servant went to his room it was found empty. The bed had not been touched during the night.

All this would have been of little consequence had the gentleman been of such a wandering, erratic nature as the majority of Idaho men, but when Horseshoe Hank heard the news, he looked grave. Buckley was not the man to do anything eccentric, and the sport felt that no ordinary thing had kept him away from his room all night.

Having thus decided, he began investigations. He had repeatedly warned Buckley to be always on the alert, for he knew Clifton was not too honest to injure, or kill, him, if he got a chance. If he once found there was danger of losing the Golden Brick, he would promptly take measures to get rid of the rival claimant.

The Man of Big Luck settled down to his work systematically, and either luck or shrewdness favored him. He found a miner who had seen Buckley at about nine o'clock, riding away from

the village, due north, in company with two other men.

He was not a prisoner, and seemed wholly unconcerned, and the informant expressed the opinion that he had gone with friends, and that he would soon return.

Hank had a different opinion. If the man had not been kidnapped he had been decoyed, which would amount to the same thing in the end, and it needed no magician to tell who had been at the bottom of the matter.

The sport did not rest there but, continuing his investigation, finally decided that Buckley's companions had been two fellows who were known as Cyclone Sam and The Slasher. Both were roughs, and their record was as bad as that any man dared make at Stonewall Bend.

The next thing for Hank to do was to take the trail. He had promised to aid Buckley, and, if his suspicions were correct, he would never find a time when his help was more needed.

He made preparations for the search at once. He would have left Dandelion Dan at the village, to watch over Lida, but the Dancing Daisy pleaded so hard to go along, and expressed such confidence in his ability to trail the horsemen, that Hank finally yielded. But it was necessary to have some ally at the village, and he looked about for a man whom he knew to be honest and thoroughly trustworthy.

Thus it was that, just after noon, Francis Nelson was accosted by the sport.

"I've got a word to say, pard," abruptly opened Horseshoe Hank, "and as I'm pressed for time, I'm coming right to the focus at once. I take you to be an honest man."

"Well, I try to be," Francis answered, smiling.

"Correct! So I thought, and for that reason I'm going to take you into my confidence a bit. I've got to leave town, and I want to ask you to look after some friends of mine a bit, while I'm gone. They have enemies, and these parties may take advantage of my absence and try some measly game."

"I see. Well, I'm sure friends of yours must be worthy of my care, and I'll do what I can. Who are they?"

"Over the gulch yonder is a little cabin in which lives a girl named Lida Deane. She has a big mulatto there to watch over her, but he ain't got so many eyes as Argus, and can't be on the box all the while, so if you'll just look that way, now and then, and see that the roof is still over her head, you'll oblige me."

"I think I have seen the girl, but I did not suppose she was one likely to make enemies."

"They made themselves, according to the fashion mean skunks have. It isn't her fault; she's as square as a die, and if you hear any one speak ill of her, depend upon it they're in the wrong."

"I'll remember, and, as I said before, I was favorably impressed by the girl. But you—are you going to leave the Bend?"

"Only for a short time."

"Perhaps you are going after Ross Gilmore?"

"No. There's another missing man, now, and I must look up Amos Buckley. He is conspicuous by his absence, as the poet says, and I am off on his trail like a blizzard. But, speaking of Gilmore, may I ask you one question, square-toed?"

"As many as you wish."

"You and he used to be pards from the word go. Honest Injun, don't you know where he is?"

"I do not. I had no suspicion that he intended to flee from the Bend, and it is remarkably strange that he went without a word to me. Even if he is as bad as men say, I should think he would have bid me good-bye. Since he did not, I am inclined to think he has wandered away while mentally deranged."

"You may be right, but if it isn't the biggest mystery of the season, you may take my hat. But I'm off now. Watch over the little girl in the gulch and I won't forget it."

"You can depend on me!"

And the men parted with a cordial clasp of their hands.

"A good fellow, from the ground up," muttered Hank, as he strode away. "I reckon Lida will be safe while I'm gone."

CHAPTER XXXIII. THE MOUNTAIN TRAIL.

DANDELION DAN soon proved that he had made no vain boast when he claimed that he could follow a trail well. When the two friends left the Bend he took the lead, and in the canyon where Buckley had been seen the previous evening, he found the tracks of three horses and they knew they had started right.

The great question then became: Could they keep it up?

Dan thrilled with the memory of old days when he hunted every species of game to be found in Colorado, and applied himself with zeal to the work. The trail led away toward the north for some time, ultimately turning a little to the left, and in many places was so distinct that they could follow at a trot.

Anon, they would strike harder soil, when Dan would leap from his saddle without stopping his horse and run along in front like a veritable trail-dog.

Horseshoe Hank was a good deal encouraged by the progress they were making, but he perceived that they were advancing toward Beehive Valley, and had a strong notion that heavy work was ahead of them. The Valley, which neither of them had ever visited, was dimly visible from the highest peaks around Stonewall Bend, and was said to be one of the most intricate bits of mountain country in Idaho. The name itself—Beehive—had been applied because of the large number of caves, obscure niches, canyons and other freaks of nature, to be found there; and there were rumors of men who had become confused while in the Valley and starved before they could find their way out.

Three miles had been traveled when the sun suddenly ceased to shine. They looked up and saw that a dark cloud had obscured it, while others of the same kind were piling up against the sky. The heavens, too, had a brassy look, and both men knew a shower was likely to occur.

The symptoms increased as they pushed on, and the wind began to wail through the gulches in a dismal way, while one-half the sky was shut in by ink-hued clouds.

"It's going to be a tough one," said Hank.

"A reg'lar rip-snortin' t'arer," said Dan, clearly, "an' what's wuss than ther rest, it'll raise ther dickens with my trailin'. It's gettin' so durned dark now that I kin sca'cely see ther buff-prints whar ther sile is hard, an' when ther rain bu'sts it'll make matters a durned sight badder. Once let enough fall ter turn these gulches inter rivers, an' whar is ther trail? Gone ter a funeral, you bet!"

"Push on as fast as possible. After the rain it will be all a matter of chance, and the further we go before she strikes, the better."

"Wal, I should wrinkle my figger-head! Hold on ter yer hat, or you'll enter ther Beehive bar-headed."

"That's where I have you foul. The golden horseshoe will hold mine on, and—give me luck!"

"Give you a ride on a cow-ketcher!" retorted Dan. "Luck will cling ter a cow-hide boot ez clos't ez to a hoss-shoe. But, never mind; your hobby is yourn, not mine, an' you kin ride it. Galory jew'sharp! d'y'e ketch onther sky?"

The Dancing Daisy referred to the clouds, which had piled up so thick that they seemed to be packed like sardines in a box, and neither man would have been surprised to see the vanguard of the storm advancing upon them.

But it did not yet strike.

The trailers pressed on, while the darkness increased and the thunder began to boom in the distance. Now and then, too, a vivid flash of lightning would flash along the ebon background.

They neared Beehive Valley, and finally found themselves among an intricate mass of gulches which crossed each other in every conceivable fashion. Up to this time Dan had followed the trail with dogged persistence, but in the gulches it was almost as dark as night and not a sign could he see. They would have lit a torch, but the immediate vicinity was bare of wood of all kinds.

In this emergency they had but two ways open to them; they must either camp where they were or press on hap-hazard. They decided, after a discussion, to pursue the latter course for a while. The gulch they were following was considerably wider than the others, and there was a chance that their predecessors might have continued to follow it, as a main avenue; so they rode on once more.

Night had practically fallen, though it was two hours ahead of time, and it bade fair to be a wild one. The thunder was booming heavily, the lightning flashed with increased vividness, and the wind swept through the gulches with moans which arose and fell like the notes of an instrument played by human hands.

"It's goin' ter be howlin' hurricane on ice," said Dan, shouting to make his words audible. "The Beehive must either raise a crop o' devestation, or else we struck it jest when the bees was mad."

"We will not go far in such a way as this; it is useless. After a little we will camp and wait until morning. If the rain washes out the trail it is our misfortune, not our fault, and we can't do any good by tearing around in this hole."

"Mebbe they'll salivate ther ole man ter-night."

"He should not have been foolish enough to be gobbled by them, after my warning," curtly answered the sport.

"I reckon he's o' the same opinion now, but he had ter get his nose burned afore he ketched onther racket."

They advanced a hundred yards further and found themselves brought to a sudden halt by a wall of rock which arose before them. They had entered a *cul-de-sac*, and further advance was impossible. Having no choice, they attempted to retrace their steps, but when they had gone on for a few minutes they found themselves in precisely the same situation as at first, and each attempt succeeded in like manner.

They were in the intricacies of the Beehive and were finding, as men had done before, that it was easier to enter than to retreat.

Still, they went on, not liking the looks of any camping-place available.

They were moving thus when their horses suddenly erected their ears, and in a moment more a dark form appeared before them.

"Hallo thar!" a voice at once exclaimed.

"Who goes?"

"Friends!" quickly answered Hank, but he did not fail to quietly draw his revolver.

"I s'pected you was, fur I don't have a crap o' enemies floatin' around loose. But who be you who pick such a place and time fur a gallop?"

"We did not pick; got caught in these villainous passes and have been vainly trying to find our way out."

"I opine ther best thing you kin do is ter stay in 'em ter-night. We're goin' ter hev a howler, an', outside, ther storm 'll be a good deal worse than hyar."

"But isn't there danger of these gulches being turned into water-courses and the earth being upheaved generally?"

"In some places ther water'll run right smart, I make no doubt, but whar my cabin is it'll be all right."

"So you have a cabin?"

"Yas; an' a stable. Ef you see fit ter ketch on, you're welcome ter quarters thar until mornin', an' then I'll show ye ther way out o' ther Beehive."

The man's voice had an honest ring, and Hank was impressed by the idea that his nature was of the same stamp; so he accepted the invitation without further unnecessary words. They then followed the stranger along a winding way where he seemed perfectly at home.

At the end of ten minutes a light became visible in the intense darkness, which had by this time settled over the mountain, and the guide announced that it was his home. The horses were put in a stable, half of stone and half of wood, near at hand, where another of their species was already standing.

Then the stranger led the way to the house.

He pushed open the door and entered, followed by Hank and Dan. Our friends were scarcely prepared for what they saw, for two men were seated at a table, playing cards, but they were introduced to them as "my pards," by the guide, in a careless way, and they accepted the situation without dissent and proceeded to sit down on the stools shown them.

Until he saw the last two men the sport had not taken the time to wonder at the fact that a man of such hospitable manners as their guide lived in such a desolate place as the Beehive, but he could not be blind to the fact that it was singular three men should do so.

Who were they, and what was their business? Report said game never frequented the sterile gulches, and it followed that the only occupation left open to the strangers was gold-digging—though gold was also said to be an unknown feature there.

Granting that it did exist, and that the men were working the soil, was it likely they would thus take outsiders into their home and their confidence?

Hank did not believe it, and while some general remarks were being made about the state of the weather, he looked critically at the trio before him.

They were typical Western men, bearded, bronzed and rough, but if they were villains Nature had forgot to put the stamp of their characters upon them. They would have passed anywhere for honest miners.

"How'd ye happen ter git inter ther Beehive?" asked the leader of the trio, who answered to the name of Buck.

"We were on our way from the Bend to Shaggy Bar, but, being strangers to the route, wandered from our course and became wholly at sea. I don't think we should have got out alone to-night."

"Ther Beehive lays 'em all over," said Buck, with a chuckle. "I reckon me an' my pards is ther only men that knows it wal. We've been hyar fur three year."

"I did not know the place was inhabited."

"You ain't ther only man that's laborin' ther same illusion, but hyar we be, all the same, an' ther's money in it."

"Gold-digging?"

"Ther identicle same. These gulches will lay Stonewall Bend 'way over in that respect. We make a good thing, an' hev it all ter ourselves."

"I don't suppose you want to take two partners?" said Hank, as quickly as though gold-digging was his sole object in life.

"Can't say we do; we play a lone hand. O' course we keep in ther good graces o' ther outside world, but ther Beehive is ours."

This statement did not serve to increase Hank's faith; on the contrary, he was more than ever impressed by the idea that if the men were really gold-diggers, they would not tell so much about themselves.

"The galoots are open to suspicion!" was the horseshoe sport's decision.

CHAPTER XXXIV. IN THE FLOOD.

OUTSIDE the cabin the wind howled and dashed down the gulch in fitful gusts. What

must have been its force on the upper crest of the Beehive the men neither knew, nor cared to know; they had enough of it where they were.

Horseshoe Hank was not so sure the cabin was a place of safety. He noticed that it trembled perceptibly when the wind struck with full force, and the storm was not then at its height.

When the rain came it was with almost startling force. It struck the cabin in a furious dash and the little building rocked as though before an earthquake. When the first dash was over it stood firmly, but all sat listening in silence to the storm. The well-worn expression, "the flood-gates of Heaven seemed unloosed," certainly was applicable then, if ever, for the rain descended with great fury.

The wind, too, winding and twisting around the many angles and corners of the gulches and cross-gulches, had a trick of moaning and wailing in varied keys, as though to furnish weird music for the occasion.

"I suppose you know the situation of affairs about here," said Hank, addressing their host, "and that you knew what you were talking about when you said we were out of the reach of the waters, but I don't feel over-and above sound in the faith."

"Thar ain't no danger," Buck asserted, "fur we built ther cabin with an eye ter jest this thing. O' course ther gulches in most places git filled up in sech cases ez this, but hyar ther pitch o' ther land makes it onpossible fur ther flood ter git at us. Ag'in, thar ain't a snugger-built cabin in Idaho than this. You will observe it ain't no slab affair, but made o' strong, buoyant logs, well dove tailed tergether. Why, it would be a reg'lar ark ef we had a flood like Noah did."

His confidence somewhat reassured the guests, and, devoting only occasional periods to noticing the storm, Hank re-directed his attention to the men and their character.

Having had his attention called to the cabin, he looked at it more closely, and he could not but think it was of late constructure. There was an air of newness all around, and if the self-styled gold-diggers had been as long in the Beehive as they claimed, it was clear they had not inhabited one building all the while.

At the end of an hour, one of the trio arose and entered the inner room. He was gone for about ten minutes, but as he came out, a sound floated through the open door which caused Hank to start.

It was a dismal sound, not unlike the voice of the wind, yet so pitched that Hank would have sworn it was the moan of a human being.

The sport looked sharply at Buck. That person was looking directly at him, but, meeting his gaze, he shifted his own to the face of the new-comer.

"How is he?" he asked.

"Comfortable," was the careless reply.

"Has he been asleep long?"

"All ther evenin'."

"That's good."

Buck then turned to Hank and added:

"We've got a sick pard in thar. He hez b'en workin' too hard, an' now he's had a spell o' fever. He's summut better now, but he is weak an' sorter peevish. Ther air o' ther Beehive ain't ther best for him, but he's comin' 'round all right."

"Haven't you had a doctor?"

"No. He don't believe in dosin', he don't, an' he's awful sot in his ways, John is. But he's doin' well."

"Isn't he lonely to-night?"

"He likes solitude—says too much chattering makes him sick. He's queer!"

Buck devoted some time to explaining "John's" peculiarities, but he did not succeed in eradicating the opinion the sport had suddenly formed.

He believed the sick man of the cabin was no sick man at all, but Amos Buckley. They had followed the trail almost to the place, and what was more likely than that they had really stumbled upon the place where the kidnapped man had been confined?

His suspicions that his companions were not honest gold-diggers were redoubled; if it was indeed the prison of Buckley, the newness of the cabin was explained; and what was more likely than that Clifton, not wishing to kill his rival for possession of the Golden Brick, had formed the plan of holding him a captive?

True, the prison was near Stonewall Bend, but an attempt to carry the prisoner further would have invited notice by the way, and what place was more likely to hold the secret than the intricacies of the Beehive?

The supposition gave rise to another question, however; if his theory was correct, why had the captors invited strangers to the cabin? This was not hard to answer.

The offer of hospitality had had more in it than was at first apparent; it was the intention that they should stay there forever. The lonely gulch would make a grave wide and deep, and the Beehive was not likely to give up its dead.

All this flashed through Hank's mind, but his face betrayed no part of his thoughts, and he

kept up the conversation easily. He had been in too many scenes of danger to be dismayed at this one, and unless the odds against them were greater than was apparent, the sport was willing to put his trust in his revolvers and those of his friend.

Luck would not desert him then unless the golden horse shoe and his right hand had lost the charm.

Dandelion Dan's face did not betray his feelings in the least degree. Had he been among his best friends he could not have been more at ease outwardly. Yet, Hank did not believe he failed to see and read the signs of the times.

For awhile the sport was tempted to at once face the whole crowd and demand, at the revolver's muzzle, if necessary, that the so-called sick man be shown him; but if, by any chance, he had made a mistake, and his hosts were honest, it would be a poor return for their hospitality.

He resolved to wait and watch, but not to leave the gulch until his suspicion had been settled.

Conversation continued in ordinary channels, and the storm howled outside. The rain did not cease its beat for a moment, and the fall was tremendous. It beat against the cabin as though determined to tear log from log, and when the wind-gusts tore along, the floor jarred under their feet. Add to this that the play of the lightning was vivid and almost continuous, and the boom of the thunder heavy and ominous, the character of the night may be dimly understood.

The self-styled miners began to yawn, and gave such plain evidence that they wished to retire, that Hank concluded to humor whatever object they had in view to a certain degree, so he announced that he was tired and anxious to get a little sleep.

"Kerect," said Buck, genially, "an' I reckon we had better all be thinkin' o' ther same thing. We will give ye quarters up in ther loft, fur we pards sleep hyar, an' it would be a trifle close fur us all."

He raised the light and led the way up a rude stationary ladder, followed by Hank and Dave. The loft was not large, but it would answer all their purposes, and they had no fault to find.

"I'd leave ther light," said Buck, "but we ain't got but one, an' our sick pard needs ther use o' that."

They assured him the light would be of no use to them, and then he said good-night and returned to the lower room.

Hank put out his hand and touched his companion.

"What's your opinion?" he asked.

"I think them galoots is a hard crowd from ther ground up. They don't act a tall brash, but ther cloven huff shows. Don't tell me they hev got a sick pard in thar; it is Buckley. He ain't dead yet, but he may be sick, or drugged. Oh! these galoots are ez tough ez they make 'em, despite their grinnin' ways, an' I don't take no stock in 'em."

"I am glad to see you have your eyes open. Perhaps you will suggest some way of procedure."

"You run ther circus; I don't."

"Wonder if we can get a look through the floor over the other room and see the 'sick man'."

"Poooty doubtful, I s'pects. I tuk notice o' ther floor when ther light was hyar, an' I see'd it was nailed down. We ain't nothin' ter take it up with, an' even ef we did hev, it would make sech a racket that ther hull thing would slump through."

"Exactly. Well, I propose to raise the trap over the ladder a little, so we can get a view of the main lower room, and we will wait and watch. If the men camp down in their room, we will keep still until morning. If they begin any suspicious movements, they may rely on us to appear on the scene. Three to two is such a slight advantage in their favor that it don't count."

"I'm good fur two, an' ef I don't balance my pardner in a meritorious way, you kin call me a fool on ther waltz," Dan modestly announced.

"Help me at the trap-door."

They raised it a little, and in such a way that it did not seem to attract the attention of those below. The trio sat quietly enough, and no significant glances passed between them, but the Man of Big Luck noticed that they no longer yawned.

For several minutes not a word was spoken above or below, but the storm did not take part in the lull. Indeed, it seemed to the two men whose heads almost touched the roof that its fury had increased. The rain dashed against the cabin in wild gusts, and a troop of demons seemed fighting in mid-air.

Suddenly, above the roar of the elements, arose a whistle which was unmistakably of human origin, and the trio in the lower room started and gave plain evidence of interest. They glanced at each other and then upward at the trap-door.

The crack left by the adventurers was not sufficient to attract attention, and Buck arose, went to the window and rapped upon the glass

Then followed a double whistle.

"I reckon thar's business afoot!" whispered Dan.

"Bet your life on that! There are more men about than those three, and I expect they mean to salivate us at once. Of course they are at liberty to lay such plans as please them, but if this court knows herself we will take a voice in the verdict."

"Revolvers is what'll be needed," the Dancing Daisy added. "They mean death fur us, but when it's all hands around we must manage ter keep ther music goin' an' make it warm fur them."

The two men laid out their revolvers with the coolness of veterans. They could no longer doubt the hostility of the strangers, but as they did not know their numbers it was wise to wait and let them show their hand. Except that, they would have descended and at once force the fighting. Beyond a doubt they had been decoyed into a trap, and in such a case it would not do to hesitate.

It was a thrilling moment, nor did it lose any element of weirdness from the fact that the storm still raged with unabated fury. The thunder seemed to peal louder than ever, and the cabin shook like a reed. Still, there seemed little danger that it would go to pieces, for Buck had made no vain boast when he said it was remarkably well built.

A movement followed on the part of those below which indicated that they were preparing for a tragedy. They drew their revolvers and looked to their condition.

"Make ready!" said Hank, between his teeth. "We don't know what the odds are to be, but we don't take water for any one."

"Not unless ther ruff caves in. Then I reckon we should take it a few."

Dan suddenly paused, for, upon the ears of both men, broke a dull, roaring sound, and then they leaped to their feet simultaneously.

"The flood!" exclaimed the Man of Big Luck.

He had time to say no more, for the cabin suddenly reeled as though smitten by a gigantic hand, and seemed about to fall on its side, but, rising like a ship from the trough of a sea, it shot along on the crest of the torrent which had come resistlessly down the gulch. Buck's confidence had been unfounded, and certain death seemed to confront the human freight.

CHAPTER XXXV.

CLIFTON CONTINUES HIS WORK.

NIGHT at Stonewall Bend.

Parker Clifton was alone in his private room and engaged in trying to read. That it was a mere attempt was shown by his nervous manner, and it is doubtful if he knew a word he had seen while fitfully turning the pages.

A knock sounded at the door, and when he opened it he saw Wah Ho and a heavily-bearded rough. His face brightened, he dismissed the Chinaman with a gesture and the white man entered.

"Sit down, Sam," said the rich man, quickly. "I had begun to fear you would not return."

"Oh! I'm jest ez sure ter git around in ther end ez a dog is ter chase his tail, but I've had a powerful sight o' work ter do, an' it's some distance ter ther Beehive an' back."

"That's true. Well, what success?"

"Good! The high-toned galoot is bottled up ez you wished, an' you kin bet yer last red he don't git away from ther boyees."

"Excellent! Did you have any trouble in decoying him to the Beehive?"

"Wal, a bit. He went right along at fust, fur he believed ther yarn we tolle him that Horseshoe Hank had got a clew ter Gilmore's wharabouts, but afore we got ter ther Beehive he begun ter smell a mice an' sorter kicked over ther traces."

"What then?"

"Then," said Sam, with a grin, "we sorter set down on him an' used ther heavy hand. We remembered your orders that he wa'n't ter be hurt bad, an' acted 'cordin', but we showed him who was boss o' ther outfit, an' he went along ez peaceful ez a lamb. Ter make a long story short, he's caged, an' thar he'll stay ef you say so. Likewise, ef you say so he shall find a grave in ther Beehive."

"That must not happen now, but we will see later. The Slasher is sure to hold fast to him?"

"Like a barnacle."

"Well, I have more work for you."

"Money an' glory is my main objects in life."

"The money you shall have, of course."

"Who's ther man?"

"The man is a woman, principally, in this case. You know the cabin over in the gulch?"

"Sart'in. That's whar ther gal lives, with ther big nigger fur a guardian angel."

"Yes. Well, I want her abducted."

"Ther nigger'll wipe ther floor all up with ther man who tries it."

"But one man will not try it alone. I don't believe you are the man to be afraid if you have two or three good men at your back."

"Wal, I should coincide. Give me ther men and I'll cl'ar out the hull caboodle. You want ther gal abductionized an' shet up, I take it?"

"Exactly!"

"Ther same o' ther nigger?"

"A bullet would be his proper portion," coolly replied Clifton.

"Bullet it is, then. I hate that yaller cuss. What business has a nigger ter be yaller? Othello was black ez ther ace o' spades, an' he was more o' a man than a dozen like Goliath."

"Othello was a Moor."

"Yas, I said he was more black," said Sam, wholly unconscious that he was misinterpreting his employer.

"And if you see a middle-aged woman, who has a sort of crazy face, serve her the same way. Lay them both over, set fire to the cabin and retreat. If the fire works well, people will think all have perished there."

"You're a daisy on ther scheme, boss, an' it does me proud ter serve ye. Count 'em laid over!"

"Can you attend to it at once?"

"I kin gather two or three good fellers in fifteen minutes, an' then we'll soon finish ther job."

"The sooner the better, and if you do the work as well as you did the Buckley affair, you shall be well rewarded. Keep the fact that I am in the game a secret from your allies."

Cyclone Sam promised, and then he left the house and went in search of his fellow assassins.

At the same time, Lida Deane and Goliath were seated alone in the main room of the cabin. The girl had been with her mother all the afternoon, and the mood of the unfortunate woman was such that Lida had strong hopes that she would yet recover her reason.

Unluckily, she was not so sanguine that her crusade in favor of her brother would result as well. She was at last satisfied that Ross Gilmore had, really, been Locke Bassett, but he had completely disappeared, and if he was found he must be persecuted for his alleged share in the Golden Brick affair.

Yes, persecuted; she would not use any other word in thinking of him. Friends and promised wife might forsake him in his hour of adversity, but she, his sister, would never do so. She had known him from her childhood, and she was as sure of his nobility as though his reputation stood unclouded.

There were many things she did not understand. He had been in the employment of the bogus mining concern of which Clifton was the head, at Beeswax Flat, and from there he had next appeared at Stonewall Bend as Clifton's partner, but she felt sure, if the truth was known, there was a good excuse for him.

At any rate, she would believe in him as long as there was a shadow of hope.

While she was thinking thus, Goliath sat like a statue at one side of the room. He was a man of thoughts and deeds, rather than words, and his whole ambition was to watch over and protect Lida. He had been born her father's slave, but had been freed in 1861, before slavery was abolished, and had clung to his fortunes while he lived, afterward changing his allegiance to his daughter.

Suddenly the statue stirred, turned his head and looked toward the inner room.

Then he arose, went to the door and tried to open it. But it did not yield to his touch.

"What is it?" asked Lida, whose sharp eyes detected the fact that he was unusually stirred by something.

"Have you fastened the door?" Goliath demanded.

"No."

The mulatto stepped back and then, bounding forward, flung his massive form against the door. It might have withstood an ordinary rush, but not that. It flew from its hinges as though struck with a battering-ram.

Lida sprung to her feet with a cry of alarm.

A startling scene lay beyond the doorway.

There was a red glow in the room and the flames were eating at a pile of combustible matter piled against the wall, while near the blaze stood four men with drawn weapons. Each of the quartette was looking toward the outer room, and the revolvers came up quickly.

Had Goliath been slow of thought that moment would have been his last, but he dropped to the floor and four bullets whistled harmlessly over his head.

Hardly had the weapons cracked when he was again on his feet, moving with the celerity which was surprising in one of his size, and he bounded on the roughs like a tornado.

Despite their superiority of numbers they receded before that rush, but he had marked his man and the fellow was not quick enough to get out of the way. He was dashed to the floor with terrible force.

Then Goliath turned on a second man and caught him in his powerful arms, turning him so that he could not use his revolvers. He would have been served like the first, but the mulatto saw that the two remaining roughs were recovering their wits and fast becoming dangerous; so he whirled his captive around and used him as a shield.

Cyclone Sam and his follower had retreated somewhat, but the venom was still in their hearts, and they knew a revolver makes a small man the equal of a large one; but when they would have used theirs, lo! their comrade was in the way.

Their hesitation was but momentary, however, for Sam was an old hand at such work, and he made a dash for the outer room, where Lida could be seen just securing weapons.

He had barely started when Goliath raised his prisoner, as though he had been a child, and hurled him forward so suddenly and resistlessly that he struck Sam with a loud thud and both went to the floor together.

Thus far the fight had been wholly in favor of the gallant defender, but he could not have eyes for all points at once. The man he had first struck down had arisen, full of vengeful fury, and he caught up a chair and struck with all his force.

The weapon descended full on Goliath's head and he fell in turn.

He did not rise. His head was a hard one, but the blow had been delivered with terrible force and consciousness had deserted him.

Lida turned at bay with a revolver, but she was too late. As she did so a hand closed over her wrist and a mocking voice sounded in her ears.

"Ha! ha! my beauty! you're a little too late on your shoot. I'll trouble you for the shooter—so!"

The revolver was wrested away and she stood helpless. Her captor was a reckless, dark-faced young man, and she felt that it would be useless to appeal to him. He dragged her into the inner room just as Cyclone Sam dizzily arose.

The place was getting too hot by far for human occupancy. The fire had seized greedily upon the combustibles devoted to its grasp; smoke was freely arising, and the heat almost scorched their faces.

In the midst of the smoke, though, as yet, untouched by the flames, lay Goliath, still insensible.

"The sooner this hound is settled, the better!" cried the young man, and he sprung forward and placed his revolver at his breast.

A crack followed and the desperado arose.

"That's the last of him!" he coarsely announced. "Git the woman out, Sam, and I'll close the door."

"You're a brick, Abe Benson!"

Cyclone Sam had begun to recover his senses, and he seized Lida by the arm.

"Out o' hyar, you spitfire!" he cried; but the girl fought him and endeavored to reach Goliath's side.

"Cowards!" she cried, wildly, "will you leave him to perish in the flames?"

"He's dead as a herring, now!" retorted Abe Benson. "I put a bullet plum through him, and no man can take such a pill in the heart and live. Away, Sam, or we'll all get burned up!"

The heat was, indeed, becoming too great for endurance, and the leading ruffian dragged Lida screaming from the room. Once, she caught his knife from his belt and tried to use it upon him, but he wrested it away.

"Of all ther durned cats I ever see'd, you're ther worst!" he said, angrily, "an' ef I was my own boss in ther game, I'd see that you'd staid with ther nigger."

"Villain! you are the tool of Parker Clifton!"

"Pile 'em on a leetle thicker; I don't keer a red. Abe, is ther door shut? Yas, I see 'tis; an' now, leave ther nigger to roast at his leisure. Tech a match ter this room, Jack, an' I'll warrant ther old hulk will soon go by ther board!"

They retreated from the cabin and Lida, finding everything useless, stood pale and silent in their grasp. Her heart seemed breaking, for Goliath had been the best friend of her life, but she was becoming accustomed to sorrow.

The abductors did not pause. It would be a short time before the light of the burning cabin would be seen by the village, and a crowd of people appear to extinguish it. Then, birds of their feather had better not be there.

They hastened away through a winding gulch, taking Lida with them, and for a while the cabin was invisible, but as they reached a spot of higher ground they looked back and saw it one roaring sheet of flame.

The heart of the persecuted girl seemed like lead in her bosom. Within that fiery compass the remains of faithful Goliath were being slowly incinerated, while she—to what fate was she doomed?

CHAPTER XXXVI.

HORSESHOE HANK'S WILD VOYAGE.

THE coming of the flood which struck Buck's cabin was nothing remarkable. The rainfall had been the heaviest seen in Idaho during the year, and nowhere does the rain concentrate its bulk so perceptibly and quickly as in gulches of our Western mountains.

Buck had been firm in the opinion that his cabin was so suitable that it would be safe from any possible flood, but the result proved the fallacy of his opinion.

Down through the gulch swept the torrent in a towering, foaming mass, and when it struck the cabin it lifted it bodily and bore it along its crest.

For a while it seemed as though it must speedily succumb to the immense strain upon it, but the flood suddenly became tributary to a stream flowing through another gulch and the little house floated along like a veritable ship over a veritable river.

It was at this moment that a man appeared on the roof, followed by a second, and they soon gained position astride the ridge-pole and sat facing each other.

"Holy Hannah!" exclaimed one, "ef this hain't ther liveliest waltz I ever danced you kin call me a fool with a wooden leg."

"You haven't seen the figure out yet," replied Horseshoe Hank.

"I've see'd all my young heart hankers arter, an' don't ye forgit it. 'Twas all hands around with a vengeance. I say, pard, I don't over an' above cotton ter this mode o' locomotive. Pooty soon we'll drive pell-mell arter a rock an' ther old ship'll go ter smash."

"We've got a light-house," coolly replied the sport, "but the ship won't mind her helm. Well, never mind; we must take things as they come, and I reckon we're a heap better off than those fellows who were in the lower room when the flood struck. I count them as drowned."

"Buckley and all."

"Yes—that is, if our suspicion that Buckley was there is correct. Let us hope we were wrong."

"We won't think o' it fur ther present, fur I take it we hev got all ther racket we kin manage hyar."

The Dancing Daisy peered ahead in the darkness. The cabin was shooting along on the surface of the flood, going as smoothly as though built for the purpose, and they might have fancied they were on a broad river had it not been for the dark rocks which loomed up on each side.

Suddenly, accompanied by a heavy roll of thunder, the lightning flashed out, and its transient light made a weird picture, showing the half submerged cabin and the clinging men, the flood and the cliff which hemmed in the stream.

"How long kin this last?" shouted Dan, as he unceasingly watched for the expected collision.

"Not a great while. Broad as the Beehive is, we must soon reach the northern extremity at this rate of speed, and then, if we are lucky enough to stand the wreck, we shall be all right."

"This shanty won't hold tergether long."

"Probably not, though proof has already been given that Buck did not lie when he said it was remarkably well made."

"But it will fall ter pieces, a part at a time, an' then whar will we be?"

"In the bath," coolly answered Hank, as he for a moment lifted from his head the water-soaked hat he had pulled low over his eyes at the first shock.

When the lightning flashed it showed the golden horseshoe still in place, but the chance that it would prove potent in this emergency and save its owner did not seem large.

On went the cabin, with its human freight holding fast to the roof. Had the river and its rocky walls been planned by human forethought, it would not have been more regular. The gulch was a hundred feet wide and on each side the cliff arose sharply. The water reached from cliff to cliff, and the scene was not unlike the water-courses of Venice, with a gondola cleaving the wave.

The rain still descended furiously, the thunder boomed almost unceasingly, and when the lightning flashed it had a brilliancy which the men thought they had never before seen equalled.

Hank was more troubled about Buckley than himself. So far he was safe, and though it would undoubtedly be a hard struggle when the cabin went to pieces, he had faith in his "luck."

But it was different with Buckley, if he had really been the "sick man" of the cabin. It seemed useless to hope that any one who had been in the lower part of the building when the shock came had survived it. The matter of the Golden Brick seemed settled so far as Buckley's share went, and he, for one, did not know where to search for the man's heirs.

The sport looked closely at the sky. He knew day could not be far away, but there was no break in the mass of clouds and he might as well have looked down as up.

On went the novel vessel, and each moment increased the wonder of the voyagers that it did not go to pieces, though it was true it was now floating evenly, with no severe jerks or wrenches to tear it apart. Still, they had expected the water to gradually undermine it, as it were, and loosen a log at a time until all were gone.

The canyon through which they were floating was the most favorable of all that crossed the Beehive, in that it was almost as straight as a carpenter's line. Down this the water went evenly, though rapidly, only disturbed at such points as minor streams joined it.

Both men began to look for the terminus of their journey, for, wide as the valley of the Beehive was, the voyage could not last forever,

but it was only when the lightning flashed that they could gain any view at all, and that was but limited.

"Ther wind is goin' down," said Dandelion Dan, after a brief silence, "an' I reckon, Mr. Noah, we'll hev a ca'm day arter all. What d'ye think?"

"I think we shall need to keep our eyes open, after this. We are nearing the end of the valley; we must be; and we're liable to drive pell-mell upon a cliff at any time—though we may follow the course of this stream and bring up wherever it empties. But look out for the cliff, all the same, and if you see it, leap in time."

"Sart'in, I will. I don't want ter be flattened inter a pan-cake ag'in' a rock, whar thar ain't no chance ter fry me."

Something occurred which prevented a reply. When the lightning last flashed Hank had noticed a wooded knoll just ahead, on the left. Rearing above its fellows like a giant, stood one tree which reached its broad arms out over the foaming water. As Dan spoke the lightning flashed again and the giant tree, reeling, hovered for a moment in space and then descended with a splash that dashed the water high against the cliff.

It had been torn from its trunk by the lightning bolt.

The voyagers sat silent and almost stunned. The electric fluid had passed near enough to them for its effects to be felt, and they were awed and filled with apprehension.

Before either one had commented upon it Hank saw a sight which brought a sharp cry from his lips. Just before them the water was churned to a white foam, and he saw that their craft would be subjected to a test it was not likely to withstand.

Dandelion Dan saw the danger and prepared to meet it; both men clung to their perch as tightly as was possible.

The cabin entered the troubled water and was caught by a sort of whirlpool which turned her on her side like a flash. Hank was almost submerged and he barely retained his hold. The water foamed and bubbled furiously and he had no idea what was occurring around him, but the cabin suddenly assumed its old position and shot away again on a more even but rapid surface.

One glance around showed him a good deal. The stream he had previously been navigating at that point joined another and more powerful one which flowed nearly in an opposite direction, and it was when the cabin struck the whirlpool made by the violent encounter of the rival streams that it so nearly lost all form; but it had swung around to the larger one and was shooting back to the heart of the Beehive with Hank still a passenger.

But he was alone. Dandelion Dan had disappeared! The sport looked in vain; his friend had disappeared as completely as was possible, and Hank shivered at the thought that he was even then in his death-agony.

He had lost his hold when the cabin careened, and there was little hope that he could battle the torrent without some solid support.

It was some minutes before the sport could recover his calmness sufficiently to devote his attention to his own affairs. When he did, nothing but his buoyant nature saved him from despair. He was going back to the heart of the Beehive, and it needed no close survey to tell him his novel craft was going to pieces.

That it had so long held together was due to the fact that it was strongly built, and that it had floated where there was no great strain upon it, but when it struck the whirlpool it had been wrenched out of shape and bade fair to go to ruin entirely before long.

When it did, the sport would have but little chance.

"The ark is going up the flume, sure, and I shall soon have the chance of battling with the river. So be it! I can swim with the best, and I reckon the Man of Big Luck is still on deck!"

He put his hand to his hat, which clung to his head as though fastened there, and touched the golden horseshoe.

"I reckon I'm all here," he added.

Just as he spoke the cabin rocked perceptibly, and he turned around, thinking it was going to pieces. Instead, he saw that he was no longer alone; another man, but a stranger, was in the place lately occupied by Dandelion Dan.

A grayish light, the forerunner of day, made him visible even without the aid of the lightning.

He was a burly fellow in the dress of a miner, bearded, bronzed and none too honest of feature; but just then there was an expression on his face which showed that he was badly frightened.

For a moment neither man spoke, but their expressions were eloquent. Hank looked ill-pleased, doubtful and sulky, while in the other man's eyes was a desperate, ferocious light which made him an unenviable fellow-voyager.

Who he was, or where he had come from, Hank did not know, but he intended to find out at once if the fellow had the presence of mind left to explain.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE FIGHT FOR LIFE ON THE CABIN-TOP.

"I SAY, pard, if the inquiry wouldn't be too brash, I'd like to know how you caught on," said the Man of Big Luck.

"Don't say a word ag'in' it—not a word!" was the hoarse reply. "My life is worth ez much ez yours."

"Nobody said a word against it. I ain't the man to deny a share in the loaves and fishes to the worthy poor. You're welcome to the quarter-deck; but what I want is to know who you are, and how you happened to be navigating these troubled waters."

"My name is Zene Black, and I war a miner in these hills. I got ketched in ther flood, an' I've been hangin' onter a log. When I see'd ther house I changed ter it."

"That's all right, in one way, but I ain't so sure it will do you much good. If you'll use your eyes you'll see the thing is breaking up. There goes a log now. She starts, she moves, she seems to feel the thrill of death from toenail to heel. Observe it, Zene?"

"Don't joke with me!" growled the man, surly.

"St. Peter forbid! I am as serious as a church-sexton, as you ought to see. But cheer up, Zene; the storm is breaking, and so is day."

The sport spoke truly. The gray tint was fast growing stronger and the storm was receding. The rain had dwindled to a drizzle, the lightning flashed less frequently and more dully and there was a sullen boom about the thunder like that of a retreating lion.

Zene Black gained a little confidence as he saw this, and a rambling conversation followed which lasted until day had fully dawned. The light, however, only showed them more plainly how serious their situation was.

The cabin was really going to pieces, and as log after log separated and floated away, what remained became more and more insecure. This would have mattered but little had there been a way of getting safely to the rocks, but the cliffs were sharp and smooth—too smooth to be scaled, and the water dashed along rapidly past their base.

As the remnant of the cabin grew smaller and weaker, Hank saw that Black looked at him with a gaze anything but friendly. He could imagine what was in the fellow's mind; the hulk would soon be too fragile to hold more than one, and when that time came Zene wished to be the only voyager.

The Man of Big Luck did not tremble at the prospect. He had confidence in his own prowess, and if his companion forced the matter it would only hasten a battle with the waters which seemed inevitable sooner or later.

Hank watched their course constantly, resolved to make a break whenever he saw a chance, and thus it was that he chanced to observe a single man standing on the top of a cliff as they swept past. He was standing in a thoughtful attitude and looking off toward the south, and thus the voyagers escaped his notice; but the horseshoe sport had a good look at him, and it was enough to cause him interest.

What was the man doing there?

It was a question Hank asked himself then, and, somewhat later, he remembered the event with increased interest.

As he changed his gaze he saw that Zene Black was on his feet. The man's face wore a wolfish, desperate look, and his eyes had a hungry twinkle as he looked at Hank.

"This hyar raft won't hold ther two ov us much longer," he observed.

"So I see."

"It's fast goin' ter pieces."

"Yes."

"Wal, I've been thinkin' it's a good idee fur one o' us ter git off an' give t'other a show."

"Just as you say. I shall be sorry to part with my fellow voyager; but if you have so decided I shall let you go. Good-by and good luck to you!"

"But I ain't goin'," was the surly reply.

"Oh! I thought you said you was."

"No. I prefer ter stay hyar. I want you ter go!"

"Me? Well, I'm sorry to disappoint you, pard; but I couldn't think of it. I staked my claim here, and here I hang on for the present."

"I say you've got ter go. This hulk ain't big enough fur us both, an' I ain't in a mood for swimmin'. It may be hard on ye, but you've got ter evacuate, an' ther sooner ye go, ther better."

"That sounds well, but it won't wash, Zenas. I was here first, and I won't go for you."

"Then I'll make yer!"

With this threat the fellow advanced a step, but Hank put out his hand.

"Hold on there, my Christian friend; hold right on! You can't put me off no more than you can shake down that cliff. Don't try it! Just now there is peace between us, but if you break it, I'll take your claim that one is enough for my motto, and do my level best to get rid of you. Keep away."

There was a moment's pause. The two faced each other, their faces stern and hostile, while the remnant of the cabin floated on with the jar and quiver which told of approaching disso-

lution. It was a poor place to fight, for it seemed as though the struggle would not only tear the roof entirely apart, but end in the death of both.

Black, however, was not to be deterred, and he crept forward like a cat, watching for a chance to close with his rival.

"You'd better take my advice and keep away, fool!" said the Man of Big Luck, sternly.

"It's your life or mine!" Black grated, through his teeth. "I am goin' ter hev ther cabin."

"Maybe you want the earth!" sarcastically asked the sport, "but you'll get one about the same time as the other."

The miner looked absolutely fiendish, as crouching for his spring, his eyes gleamed with a wild and ferocious light. Suddenly he sprung forward, his arms outstretched for a grapple with his companion.

Hank had set himself firmly for the shock, and he grappled with his man unhesitatingly.

Then followed a desperate struggle.

The small, slanting roof of the cabin would never have made a good place for a fight, while in its weakened condition every move on their part made it shake and rock as though about to separate piece from piece.

Yet fight the men did, furiously. Clasped in each other's arms they reeled back and forth, striving to throw each other over, and breathing in gasps. Now and then they would slip on the roof; but every nerve was set for such an occurrence, and they would quickly recover their balance.

Hank found he had met no mean antagonist: but he did not waver for a moment, and his strength and skill stood him in good use. Even then he saw that their support was being severely tried, and he determined to make the fight a short one.

Neither noticed that they were driving on to a new peril. Just ahead the canyon made a sharp turn to the right, and the water was dashed against the cliff with a force which left a boiling mass of foam at the base. Later it recoiled and sped away toward the right, but the cabin was sweeping straight toward the cliff.

If they struck, it would tear the remnant of the cabin in pieces, and most probably instantly kill both men.

Unconscious of this, Hank put forth all his power for a final effort. He seized his opponent in a resistless grasp and forced him back. Black endeavored in vain to baffle the effort; he fought like a tiger, but he was in the hands of a man his physical superior.

Then he was raised aloft, clear of the roof, and a cry of rage fell from his lips. He feared the result of the battle with the angry waters.

But just as Horseshoe Hank was about to hurl the miner from the roof, both saw the new peril which threatened them.

They were driving down toward the cliff at full speed, and were almost there; and the towering rock and beating water looked ominous enough.

The sport half-unconsciously paused, but just at that moment an unseen current struck the cabin and it shot to the right with a jerk, which sent Black a dozen feet away and caused Hank to fall to the roof. He barely saved himself by holding fast, and then the raft—it could scarcely be called more than—shot along close to the foot of the cliff.

Would it collide? If so, his fate was sealed.

There was a moment of suspense, and then it swept past, barely grazing the rock, and dashed along in its new course.

Hank, however, saw that his foothold was fast going to pieces; it could not last more than five minutes more, and he looked ahead to see what chance he had.

As he did so a sharp cry arose, and looking to see its cause, he perceived that he was speeding toward a boat which contained three men. He who held the oars saw his danger and pulled lustily, but at the first he had had all he could do to navigate the stubborn water, and as the raft was under such headway he had no chance at all.

Horseshoe Hank, once more standing erect, had recognized one of the occupants of the boat, and with great surprise; but in a moment more he struck, and chaos reigned.

The sport involuntarily turned a somerset and shot ten feet forward, while the raft went all to pieces, and the boat turned over with more emphasis than grace.

All this Hank perceived, and as he knew the boat would be carried toward him, he resolved to be a passenger.

He had not miscalculated; it floated forward; but as the sport laid hold he caught sight of another face, and saw its owner desperately clinging to the edge.

"Buckley!" he exclaimed.

"Horseshoe Hank! In God's name, save me!"

"Can you swim?"

"Only a little."

"Well, do that little when I give the word. You and I seem to be all that's left of the outfit, and we must right the boat. I will do

that, if you can manage to float for a moment."

Buckley had been badly frightened, but the sport's coolness had a due effect on him.

"I can," he said firmly.

"Very good, do so. Now, then, here goes!"

Buckley released his hold, and Hank righted the boat with a quickness which was surprising. Then he leaped in, and helped his companion to follow.

"Here we are again!" he said cheerfully, as he shook the elder man's hand.

"Thank Heaven for it!"

Hank did not answer. He was looking for the oars, but they were drifting a hundred feet ahead of them. The late crew had disappeared from the scene.

"We have no way to paddle the boat, so we may as well sit down and take it easy. First of all, give me the story of your adventures."

Buckley obeyed, but it was a simple narrative. He had been decoyed by Cyclone Sam and the Slasher, and confined in a shanty newly built in the Beehive. Then Sam went away, and he was left in charge of the Slasher and another man. When the gulches became flooded they had taken to the boat, which had been left by some unknown former dwellers, but which they had at first used as a roof for their shanty, and by skillful management had escaped all danger until Hank run into them.

The story showed that the sport's suspicions of the cabin where he had found shelter had been unfounded. The sick man was not Buckley, and his former entertainers might have been honest men after all.

Buckley was worn out by his hard experience, but he had brightened perceptibly since meeting Hank, in whom he had great confidence, and as they saw that they were nearing the further side of the Beehive, they had little doubt of their ability to escape.

The Man of Big Luck would have been comparatively cheerful had he not remembered the fate of Dandelion Dan.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

LIDA.

CYCLONE SAM and his men made their retreat a rapid one after abducting Lida. The girl no longer struggled against her fate. At first it was despair which made her so passive, and as she looked back at the light of the burning cabin she felt that she might as well die and end her troubles; but in a short time the natural courage of her nature asserted itself and her step grew firmer and her mind clearer.

She was positive that harm was not intended her. If such had been the case she would have been left to die with Goliath, and the flames would have destroyed all evidence of the crime. No, a different fate was intended for her, and she resolved to remain cool and watchful and yet manage to escape.

It had been Cyclone Sam's intention to reach the Beehive that night, but the heavy thunder and the lightning, coupled with the darkness which reigned when no light was vouchsafed by the electric fluid, caused him to abandon the idea.

When two miles from Stonewall Bend he conducted the party to a cave of which he knew, and proceeded to make the place comfortable. Wood was brought from a neighboring slope, and in the cave a huge fire was built.

Lida was treated with a consideration founded on Clifton's orders. Cyclone Sam allowed no one except himself to address her, and except that he was inexorably firm in the course he had marked out, she could find no fault with his course. She was placed on the side of the fire furthest away from the exit, and bonds were not even placed on her hands.

After a while her attention became directed to Abe Benson, the younger member of the outlaw party. He was reclining on the rocky floor and taking no part in the conversation, and she noticed that his gaze was almost constantly fixed on her face.

There was a light in his eyes which she did not fail to read. He had taken a fancy to her at first, and it had deepened with each passing moment. He had lived a wild, reckless and wicked life, but he had sufficient intelligence to know that to have any chance with such a girl, a man must abandon these ways.

Looking at her by the fire-light, he felt that he would be willing to do it—if only he could have her for his own. He even felt sorry he had lived such a life, and saw what a difference it would make if he had a true woman for his wife.

That he could keep the resolutions he formed, he did not doubt, but as he had never tried, it is just as well to take his embryo reformation with a shade of allowance.

Lida, we repeat, read his admiration in his glowing eyes, but it only made her shiver. She remembered that he was the man who had put a bullet into Goliath's breast, and afterward arranged everything so that the fire would consume his body.

Of all the roughs, she had the greatest horror of Abe Benson.

On his own part, he began to consider how

he could rescue her from Cyclone Sam. He had vague visions of going to some other town than Stonewall Bend and becoming her worse-half for life, which he felt sure he could do if she was but rescued.

She would not be ungrateful for such a service.

The hours wore on. Outside, the rain was falling heavily and the wind moaned around the cave-entrance dismally. It was a night when all were glad to be free from the rain, though Lida would gladly have gone out and braved it, had she been able to thus leave her present companions.

Later, Cyclone Sam prepared for the night's sleep. He divided the night into four watches, so that a man could be on guard all the time, and then Lida was given a niche off the main room and three of the four men lay down to sleep.

Abe Benson was sorry he did not have the first watch, but he resolved that when his turn did come he would do his best to rescue the captive.

The cave became silent. All was still in Lida's niche, and two of the roughs soon fell asleep. Benson remained awake and watched the guard, hoping he would fall asleep. This was just what the fellow came near doing, for his head soon began to nod, but he realized the danger and arose and began to pace back and forth.

Except for his footsteps no sound was heard save the storm outside, but that raged furiously. The wind howled through the gulch in a way which bore the rain almost horizontally, and the flash of the lightning was brilliant in the extreme.

It was when the storm was at its height that a dark form came creeping toward the entrance. The rain beat upon it pitilessly, and the wind would have driven back a timid creature, but in this case there was no faltering.

The form was that of a man, and in the almost gigantic build we recognize Goliath, the mulatto.

He had not perished in the burning house. How he escaped he did not know, but he recovered consciousness to find himself outside. Lida was gone; where, no one knew. He suspected she had been taken to the foothills and hurried that way.

At first he went blindly, but chance gave him a clew. By a flash of lightning he had seen the abductors in retreat. He increased his speed. He saw them no more, but he felt sure they would camp somewhere to avoid the furious storm, and he looked for that camp.

It was a haphazard attempt, and would probably have resulted in failure had they not built a fire. That betrayed them, however. He saw the reflection of the blaze and crept forward.

By that time he was a wet and weary man. The rain had drenched him to the skin, his garments clung to his person, and he still felt the effects of the blow received at the cabin. A common man would have given up in despair, but he had pressed on with unwavering resolution.

As he neared the entrance to the cave he used extreme caution. There was nothing obscure about it, and when he reached a place where he could look inside, he was also liable to be seen.

Looking, he saw the fire, and the three men stretched out beside it, while the guard paced indolently to and fro. There was no sign of Lida, but Goliath felt sure he had discovered where she was held prisoner.

For several minutes he lay as motionless as the rocks about him. He was still exposed to the rain, which beat upon him pitilessly, but he was indifferent to it.

Anon, the guard returned to his seat. He yawned, and seemed to consider his duty a bore. He leaned his head against the rock and closed his eyes, at the same time deciding that not on any condition would he fall asleep.

Goliath watched him sharply. He noted each phase of the fellow's tendency to somnolency, and he saw with pleasure that he was likely to yield entirely. When this occurred he would enter the cave and look for Lida.

It did not matter to the mulatto that he had no weapon which would be of use, except his knife—his revolvers were as wet as though soaked in a river. He was prepared to risk his life in Lida's service, let the odds be ever so great.

Dead silence reigned save for the rush and moan of the storm. The men who lay on the floor, the guard, Goliath—all were motionless.

The guard slept.

Goliath waited as long as he dared. It was uncertain what the guard would do; he might sleep on or he might awake with a start; it was hard to select the most favorable time for making the contemplated movement.

While the mulatto hesitated, there was a movement on the part of one of the roughs, and Abe Benson arose to a sitting posture. The spy saw it with regret, but it was his policy to proceed quietly, if possible, and he consoled himself with the thought that the man would soon sleep again. Goliath remembered him as one of

the most active of the assailants at the cabin, and suspected that he was the leader.

Benson slowly arose to his feet, looked sharply at Cyclone Sam, and then glided toward the interior of the cave.

He went at once to the recess devoted to Lida's use. She was not asleep, and her voice at once arose in a challenge:

"Who is there?" she demanded.

"It is I," Abe answered, in a subdued voice. "Have no fear, Miss Deane, for I come as your friend."

"My friend!" sarcastically retorted Lida. "It is false! You are my bitterest enemy; it was you who killed Goliath!"

"Goliath is not dead."

"I saw you fire a bullet to his heart."

"You saw me *pretend* to, but I did him no injury. I fired into the floor. Do you know why I was so active then? It was because my sympathies were with you, rather than with your enemies. After the mulatto was down I knew some one would try to kill him, so I resolved to take matters in my own hands. I fired, but I did not harm him."

"That is of no consequence. He was left to burn in the cabin."

"Wrong, again, Miss Deane. He was not so left. Do you remember I was the last man to leave the inner room?"

"Yes."

"Before I left I dragged his insensible form to a window, and then cast it beyond the reach of the flames. Beyond a doubt, Goliath is now alive and well."

Lida looked sharply at the reckless, dissipated-looking face before her.

"You are deceiving me," she said.

"Upon my word of honor, I am not. I swear I have told the truth. I do not sympathize with Cyclone Sam and his way of doing business, and, to prove it, I am now going to rescue you, if possible. If I fail, Abraham Benson will die doing his duty!"

The fellow tried to instill a heroic ring into his voice, and as he was in earnest in his desire to impress her favorably, he was not wholly unsuccessful.

"If you are sincere, I pray that Heaven may help you. Whether you are or not can be proved by your future course. Rescue me, and I will believe."

"That is what I propose to do. I am only waiting until Cyclone Sam and his ruffians are sound asleep. In the meanwhile, let me ask if you know my chief motive."

"Your chief motive?"

"Yes. I will explain what I mean. Miss Deane, forgive me, but it was your face—your beauty and your goodness—which stirred all the better impulses of my heart and led me to resolve to risk all for your sake. I am not a worshiper of ladies in general, but, to win your favor, I would go through fire and flood!"

He removed his hat and stood in her presence with the halo of romance figuratively around him. Nor was his look insignificant. Blessed with a good form and a handsome face, he might have made a very passable knight of the Middle Ages.

Lida began to suspect the price he would ask for his services, but she did not think it was to her dishonor to secure his aid in any reasonable way.

"I feel honored by what you say," she answered, "but I am too much alarmed to answer now. Take me to Goliath and I will then talk coherently."

"You will not forget me?"

"Never!"

"I have risked all on the hazard of the die, and I would rather die here than to rescue you and see you scorn me."

"Believe me, I shall not do that. I trust I am not ungrateful, and once away from here I will try and prove it."

"I will trust you," said Benson, with an undecurrent in his voice as though he was thinking of the revenge he would take if his confidence proved misplaced. "Come!"

He turned without further words, and she followed him from the niche. Cyclone Sam and his two followers were soundly sleeping. All seemed favorable for the venture.

They stole across the floor. Lida's heart beat quickly and loudly. It was a moment of painful suspense, but they crossed the floor and emerged from the cave into the driving wind.

As they did so, a hand fell heavily upon Benson's shoulder.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

HORSESHOE HANK HAS AN IDEA.

ABE BENSON wheeled suddenly, but the hand which he threw up was seized in a firm but resistless grasp.

"Be calm!" said a hurried voice; "I am a friend; be calm!"

Benson was not the man to fail to recognize the speaker, but he was by no means well pleased to see him. He feared that if Goliath had a part in it, his own would become inferior.

The mulatto, on his part, was proceeding to Lida's advantage, not to his own. He had seen Benson among the most active assailants at the

cabin, though he did not know of the revolver fired at him when he lay unconscious on the floor, but he realized that the man was turning against his fellows, whether he was sincere in his devotion to Lida or not.

"Goliath!" exclaimed the girl joyfully.

"Not so loud!" began Abe hurriedly, but the mischief was already done.

The single word had been enough to arouse the guard, and he leaped up with a suddenness which sent his rifle rattling to the rocky floor; and at the sound Cyclone Sam and his other follower also sprung to their feet.

"This way!" exclaimed Benson, catching Lida's arm.

It was too late to avoid discovery, however; the gaze of the leading rough had instinctively wandered to the entrance, first of all, and he distinctly saw the trio.

"The prisoner has escaped!" he shouted.

"This way, boyees; follow me!"

And the whole party surged to the door.

Benson was hurrying Lida away, but Goliath had different views. He had lain in the soaking rain until his joints had become stiffened, and he knew he would not be able to run fast enough to escape the pursuers. He therefore determined on a different course.

This he explained to his companions, and though it was far from being agreeable to Benson, they dropped behind an adjacent rock. Then Goliath anxiously awaited the result of his plan, his sole weapon, the knife, tightly grasped in his hand. If the worst came they would find him a hard enemy to meet.

"They have gone down the gulch!" said Cyclone Sam. "Away, men, an' I'll give ten dollars ter ther feller who fust lays hands on ther girl!"

They dashed away, and then Lida and her defenders turned and entered the cave. They proposed to make it their fort for the night.

Abe Benson looked sulky, for he would much rather have had all the credit of rescuing the girl, but as he saw with what a glad smile she turned to Goliath, he knew he must play his cards with judgment or lose all he had gained. He now regretted that he had not allowed Cyclone Sam to kill the mulatto when at the cabin, but it was too late to think of that.

"Take one of my revolvers!" he said, extending the weapon with an air of frankness. "I fancy we shall be able to hold our position against those fellows. With suitable weapons, we might keep half of Idaho outside that narrow entrance."

"Why is it that you, one of them, fight against them?" asked Goliath, regarding him closely.

"Because his ways are too tough for me. I hired out to him at the village without knowing what the job was, and when I caught on I had to take the odds into consideration and float with the tide for awhile. I hope I shall be able to prove my sincerity by helping you straight through."

"You are welcome if you are sincere."

"Do you doubt me?"

"No."

Goliath saw fit to answer in a way calculated to keep peace in the party, but he was by no means ready to believe in the man. There was an expression on his face the mulatto could not accept as that of an honest man, but, whatever the facts, it was well to have an ally, rather than an enemy, in the cave.

Abe proceeded to explain the part he had taken in saving Goliath at the cabin, and as the latter thus gained light on the way in which he had made his exit from the burning building, better feeling was really established between them.

They at once made preparations for the defense of the cave. Cyclone Sam and his followers carried rifles—though the rain would soon render them useless—while Lida's protectors had only a revolver each.

Remembering this, they proceeded first of all to block up the entrance with boulders, after which a breastwork was constructed further back.

Lida's courage had wholly returned. She had great faith in Goliath, while if Benson attempted treachery, she knew the giant would be more than a match for him.

It was not a great while before voices were heard outside the cave, and they knew Cyclone Sam and his men had returned. There was a rattling which indicated they were taking away the rocks, and Goliath fired his revolver to warn them what would happen if they exposed themselves.

All sounds then ceased, nor was anything more heard for hours. An examination of the interior showed there was no other means of entrance, and the men waited and watched the entrance. Benson was making the most of the situation and trying to impress his companions favorably, but they regarded his devotion with a degree of suspicion.

Thus the night wore away, until Benson's watch finally indicated that it was day. The trio now found themselves placed in a less pleasant position. They were of the opinion that Cyclone Sam and his men were outside, and waiting for them to appear that they

might renew the attack, which placed them in a state of siege.

At the end of two hours they cautiously removed the blocking from the entrance. Examination failed to reveal any sign of the enemy. An attempt was made to draw a shot by means of an effigy, but this utterly failed, and they might have ventured out had it not been for one thing.

After the rain ceased the sun once more shone, and as Goliath was watching the rocks he detected the glimmer of something bright among the rocks at the further side of the gulch. It speedily vanished, but he knew it had been the reflection of the sun from the barrel of a rifle.

The roughs were still at their post.

The besieged had no intention of walking into a trap, and thus the forenoon wore away.

The end came in an unexpected manner. Goliath heard the sound of voices and, looking out, saw Horseshoe Hank and Buckley passing. He called to the sport, and the two were soon in the cave and listening to an account of the affair.

They had escaped from the Beehive without further adventures, and had thus far returned successfully to the town, though they looked rather the worse for wear, and felt in about the same condition.

But the blood of the Man of Big Luck resumed its usual warmth when he had heard all.

"I'll take a hand in this game!" he coolly observed. "If those fellows are still playing dog, I'll rout them out. Give me a dry revolver, Goliath, and I'll go over and see them!"

"I will go, too!" the mulatto quickly said. "I shall be proud to fight at your side. Come!"

"You will be killed!" exclaimed Lida.

"I don't feel that way," coolly answered the sport, "but if it comes to that, it will be a consolation to know that I died in the defense of one like you."

He removed his hat and bowed to the girl, and a dark scowl came to Benson's face as he saw the flush which arose to Lida's face. No more was needed to show him that he had a rival, and that the rival had the inside track.

Hank and Goliath were not to be turned from their purpose, so they took the revolvers and started out. Benson had given him his own weapon mechanically, but he was sorry for it the moment it was gone. He stood for a moment in deep thought and then turned to Lida.

"Miss Deane," he said, "it is to me that you chiefly owe your safety."

"You moved first of all," she guardedly replied.

"What is to be my reward?"

His tone was so brusque that she looked at him closely.

"You will always have my gratitude," she replied.

"That is not enough!" he vehemently said. "I have helped you because I loved you, and only your love can repay me for what I have done. Swear that you will be my wife!"

It was a novel way of proposing matrimony, and one Lida by no means admired.

"Pardon me, but I cannot do that. I am not anxious to marry, and I feel only friendship for you—"

Benson saw that Hank and Goliath had reached the rocks. There was still no sign of Cyclone Sam and his men, and if they failed to find them they would soon return. Therefore, he harshly interrupted:

"I am not to be put off thus. Once more I say, swear!"

"Indeed I will not!" she exclaimed, losing all prudence before his audacious demand and savage manner.

"Then, by the gods, you shall go with me whether you will or not!"

He uttered the words with a wolfish look on his face, and at the last he sprung forward and seized her. Excitement nerved him to unusual strength, and with his arm around her waist he compelled her to keep at his side.

Buckley, who knew nothing of the standing between the two, saw this with amazement, but he was not the man to stand idle when a woman was in peril, and he sprung to her rescue, at the same time uttering a warning cry to Hank.

Abe looked back over his shoulder and a murderous light was in his eyes. He saw that, weighted as he was, he must be overtaken if Buckley held to his purpose.

"Back, you hound!" he shouted. "If you try to stop me, I'll kill you like the cur that you are!"

The threat did not dismay the pursuer, but as he came nearer Benson suddenly released his hold, staggered and fell to the ground, while the sharp report of a rifle echoed through the gulch.

Instinctively, Lida looked toward the top of the cliff. There stood Cyclone Sam, the fatal rifle still clasped in one hand. He moved the other tragically.

"That's ther way I sarve traitors!" he shouted.

At the last word he wheeled and disappeared from view, and when they looked for him he was not to be found.

His work, however, had been thorough. Abe

Benson had never known what hurt him; with a bullet in his heart he lay motionless on the bottom of the gulch.

Lida began to see more clearly that his temporary efforts in her behalf had been but selfish ones, but he had lost his life for his double treachery and it would be more than he deserved to speak harshly of him.

The party did not linger long near the place, for it was wiser to go to the village and tell them what Cyclone Sam had done than to remain and invite a second shot from his rifle.

They went, but at the edge of the town met—Dandelion Dan!

It was a glad surprise for Hank, for he had never doubted but his ally had perished in the Beehive, and the pards were soon shaking hands vigorously.

"Time is fleetin'," said the Dancing Daisy, "and I've got a word fur yer private ear. I've see'd ther man in ther brown coat!"

"Who?"

"Ther galoot I tolle ye I had see'd friskin' 'round ther Garrett cabin, in old times, an' fur whom I've been lookin' a year; in brief, ther man who stole Mira from you."

The face of the sport was a little less high-colored than usual.

"Are you sure?" he demanded.

"I kin sw'ar to it!" Dan emphatically replied. "This time, ez afore, I didn't see his face, but I kin sw'ar ter ther coat!"

CHAPTER XL.

THE DRAMA OF LOVE AND HATE NEARS A CRISIS.

HORSESHOE HANK had regained his usual coolness.

"Tell me all about it," he said, steadily.

"Wal, ye see when I got spun off'm ther ruff' o' ther cabin I didn't hev time ter say 'All hands around!' afore I struck ther water. I thort I was a gone goose, but I was flung so furter ther left that I was outer ther wu'st o' ther whirlpool, an' ez a log floated inter my reach I ketched on an' begun to spin down-stream. I looked back an' see'd ther cabin on one side, with you hangin' onter it fur dear life, an' I yelled, 'Balance yer pardner!' ez loud ez I could holler. You didn't heer me though, an' I had time ter say no more, though you follered in my track when ther cabin resumed ther old shape."

"Ter make a long story short, I went faster than you an' kept outer ther way, an' then follered a series o' spins an' counter-spins till my head was a total wreck. It beat any dance I ever war in—ther Devil's Dream ain't nowhar'. It was while circumnavigatin' thus that I passed a raft on which war two men. One was layin' down, ez though hurt, but t'other stood up boldly an' used a paddle. He was ther man in ther brown coat; I'll sw'ar to it, though, ez I said, I didn't see his face. I soon waltzed outer sight o' them an', not a great while arter, struck dry land. That's all!"

"That's enough, and I'll drop around and see the boy, brown coat and all, one of these days," said Hank calmly. "For the present, let's be content to go to the hotel and get dry clothes."

They started, but had gone only a few yards when the Man of Big Luck suddenly paused.

"Hold on! hold on!" he said.

"All right; slow up on ther music, Buckley."

"I have it!" added Hank.

"Tie it up, then," encouragingly answered the Dancing Daisy.

"The man in the brown coat! By Jupiter! I have it! Come, Dan, on to the hotel, and get into dry rags. Then, there's work for us to do!"

Stella Clifton was sitting alone in her room, that evening, when one of the Chinese servants announced that Francis Nelson was below and wished to see her. She went down and cordially greeted him.

"I have but a few minutes to stay," he said, "but I have something of importance to say while here and will proceed to do so at once. In the first place, I have fully considered my position, and have resolved to leave Stonewall Bend."

Her face clouded.

"I am sincerely sorry for that."

"I am sorry to go, but, to add to the reasons before given, I have received a business offer from a San Francisco house, and it is a chance I must not despise. But, what I wished to say is this: It has come to my ears that your father has promised your hand to Mr. Ruford!"

Stella started back.

"Impossible!" she exclaimed.

"Unfortunately, it is too true. It seems Ruford has done him services worthy of some reward, and you have been chosen as the article best suited to the bargain."

Nelson spoke bitterly, but Stella at once exclaimed:

"It will never be; I will not marry Ruford. I most cordially dislike the man."

"Mr. Clifton has promised to make you obey."

"He shall see I will not."

"Did you ever know him to fail in what he attempts?"

Stella did not answer. Too well she knew her father's inexorable way when he had decided upon a matter.

"I have grave fears for you," said Francis, his voice trembling slightly.

"And when you go away, I shall have no friend to help me!" suddenly and bitterly cried the girl.

"Oh! Steila, if only I might offer my aid!" he exclaimed, in a husky voice. "Heaven knows I would risk my life, everything, for you. Why can't it be? Stella, if you will be mine I will guard you from every peril! Forgive me—I may be mad—but if you will be my wife, I will guard you from every danger. Come to me; come with me; and let us secretly leave Stonewall Bend to-night, never to return. In some new town we will begin life anew and forget all the dark past!"

With an impulsive movement he had taken her hand, and his voice was earnest and passionate. That he loved her no one could doubt, and though his manner was respectful and considerate, he seemed longing to clasp her in his arms.

The color retreated from the girl's face until it was almost as white as marble, and it was plain she was fighting a battle with herself. Had it not been for one thing, she would have cut loose from known troubles and dared the unknown in company with Francis Nelson. But, even then, came a recollection of Ross Gilmore.

"Francis!" she exclaimed, in a voice scarcely above a whisper, "do not—do not speak like that. You are mad, and I—I am almost so. But I cannot go with you!"

"Oh, my darling, do not say that! You are all I have to love—I haven't a relative in all the world—and I cannot live apart from you. Go with me, dear, and I will protect you from every storm of life!"

"I have before told you that I feel honored by your offer," said Stella, slowly, "but I do not feel that I love you well enough to become your wife. Perhaps—perhaps it would be different if it were not for Ross Gilmore."

"Poor Ross!"

"I am not sure he is dead, and I will not believe him dishonest. I do not know what to believe. I am perplexed, confused and unhappy."

"Go with me, Stella, and I will do my best to brush the dark clouds away and make you happy. The great love I bear you will last forever, and I cannot live without you. Come with me, dearest—come! By morning we can reach Swordfish, and there be married, and then go on to a new home and a new life. Will you come?"

He held out his hands and his face was eager, but she shook her head firmly.

"Forgive me if I am harsh, Francis, for I respect you as I do no other man, and I know your noble nature, but I cannot agree. Until I know Ross Gilmore is dead, or as guilty as men say, I will continue to love him; and when I am convinced against my will—then I'll bid farewell to active life forever."

"Heaven forbid that I should speak ill of Ross Gilmore, whom I love as a brother, but you remember the note to him from Mira Garrett?"

"It may have been a forgery."

"Stella!"

"Understand me, Francis, I know you had no share in it, but Mira may have arranged all because she hated me. I know your noble nature too well to think you would take part in such a work, but I cannot trust others."

"I wish you could trust me sufficiently to marry me," said Nelson, gloomily.

"My confidence in you is as great as you would wish, but I shall never marry unless Ross returns."

Nelson stood in silence for a moment, his face dark and gloomy, and then he started forward.

"Stella, will you doom me to everlasting misery? To-night I leave Stonewall Bend, and, unless you accompany me, we part never to meet again. It maddens me to see you daily and know there is such a wall between us—I can bear it no longer. My reason will leave me if you refuse again. Stella, Stella, will you go with me?"

Paler still became the girl's face, and it was clear she suffered keenly, but she showed no signs of changing her decision. Before she could answer, however, another voice broke the silence.

"Allow me to answer in behalf of my daughter, Mr. Francis Nelson. You cannot have her, and if you go quietly from the house it will save me the trouble of throwing you out!"

Nelson folded his arms and faced the speaker calmly. He knew it was Mr. Clifton, but as he turned about he was rather surprised to see Ruford by his side.

"Did you hear me, sir?" demanded Clifton, sharply, as the young man did not answer.

"I did, sir."

"Well, what have you to say?"

"Simply that I have done nothing to merit such language."

"Nothing? You are a sneaking, spying goody-goody chap, and I will break your head if I find

you here again. Clear out, or I'll call Wah Ho!"

"Father!" exclaimed Stella, "I am ashamed to hear such words. You are unjust to Mr. Nelson and tyrannical to me. If you persist in this, I, too, will leave your house."

"No, you will not, for I shall not let you. I mean to have obedience from you in the future, and now is the time to begin. You are to marry Ruford, here, who is more of a man in five minutes than Nelson will be if he lives to be a Methuselah, while as for this ranting lover of yours—Nelson, for the last time, will you go?"

"I am the guest of Miss Clifton, not of yourself," coolly answered Francis, "and when I have said good-night I will go. This I decline to do while other people are present."

"Let me throw him out!" exclaimed Ruford, starting forward.

"Try it!" retorted Nelson. "Place but one hand upon me and I will make you the sickest man in Idaho!"

He spoke with the confidence of one who knows his own prowess, and is not afraid it will desert him in the hour of trial, but Ruford would not take warning. He sprung forward, his arms outstretched to grasp him, but Nelson's right arm shot forward, and the clerk went down with a crash which shook the room; and once there he lay moaning with pain.

"Ruffian!" cried Clifton, "I will call Wah Ho!"

"Spare yourself the trouble," said Francis, coldly. "I am now ready to go."

"And I," suddenly interrupted Stella, "will accompany you!"

"You, Miss Clifton?"

"I will go where you go; I will be your wife!" she boldly answered.

A short pause followed the eventful words, but it was speedily broken, and in a way which startled all who heard.

"You may go with him if you wish, my lady, but I give you fair warning that, by so doing, you will marry a bigamist. I am already his wife!"

CHAPTER XL.

THE FATE OF THE GOLDEN BRICK.

ALL eyes were turned toward the door, from which came this startling announcement, and they saw Mira Garrett.

Had any one been looking at Nelson they would have seen his face assume a sort of livid hue, but in a few seconds he managed to assume a sneering smile.

"I repeat it," added Mira; "Francis Nelson is my husband, and, what is more, he is the man who caused Ross Gilmore to so mysteriously disappear!"

"That's a fact, and here I am to swear to it!"

It was still another new voice which made the announcement, and Horseshoe Hank crossed the threshold followed by Dandelion Dan.

He gazed on Nelson, and it was plain that the slumbering lion in his nature was fully aroused.

"I know you at last as you are, Francis Nelson, alias Lewis Gordon. You are the man who came to Colorado and afterward eloped with Mira Garrett, and who abducted Gilmore for his money. You've got a long head and you've run a long rope, but the jig is now up."

"And he was planning to elope with that white-faced thing!" said Mira, looking contemptuously at Stella.

"Yes, he feared his share in the Gilmore business was about to leak out, and as he was tired of you, he planned to elope with Stella. He's a man of honor, he is, and I don't suppose he thought the girl would mind the fact that he already had one wife."

"He's a villain and a scoundrel!" declared Mira, all her venom stirred up by Hank's words.

"Can't some one else come in on the chorus?" questioned Nelson, with unwavering coolness.

"You two are having the racket all to yourselves."

"We do need a man on the chorus, and I'll summon him. Come in!"

The Man of Big Luck raised his voice, and at the call another person entered and stood with all eyes fixed upon him.

It was Ross Gilmore!

He was easily to be recognized, though he was pale, thin and weak, but it was the same Ross who had left Stonewall Bend so mysteriously. He stood looking at Nelson with stern and accusatory eyes, and for the first time, that man wavered.

"It is ended!" said Gilmore, in a deep voice. "False friend and dishonest man, your day of triumph is over, and I have returned to expose you. In prison, you will have a chance to meditate on your ways."

"Never mind the preaching!" interrupted the detected villain, brusquely.

"If you prefer my narrative you shall have it," Ross curtly answered, "but, first, there are other friends who must be here."

He stepped to the door, and several of the most prominent men of the town entered, together with Lida Deane, Goliath, "Leah," and Amos Buckley.

It was now Clifton's turn to be startled, and

he arose quickly; but Gilmore turned on him in a way which was startling.

"Sit down! We have something to say here, and you shall hear it, willingly or otherwise!"

"That's about the size of it, pard," said Horseshoe Hank, addressing Clifton. "You can't run this court any longer."

"I demand justice—" blusteringly began Clifton, but the sport interrupted him.

"Maybe you want the earth! Come, old man, sit down, before you get helped. Gilmore, spin your yarn."

"My real name is Locke Bassett," began the ex-junior partner, abruptly. "Two years ago I was hired as confidential clerk by the Queen Mary mining concern, of Beeswax Flat, Colorado. At the head of the company was Parker Clifton, though his shares were represented on the books under a false name, and he never came to the Flat."

"Ultimately the mine was proved to be a swindle. I had never suspected it; but I soon found I had been hired and used as a cat's-paw. Papers were arranged so that it looked as though I was responsible for the greater part of the irregularities, and I lost my courage and fled. I assumed a false name and came to Stonewall Bend, little knowing I had come to the very home of the leading swindler. Parker Clifton and I met. Neither knew the other had figured in his past life, and we became partners. Finally, too, I became engaged to Stella Clifton. I mention this as essential to my story."

"A short time ago Mr. Clifton proposed that we sell our mine, the Golden Brick, and remove to Denver. I was reluctant to go. I had political ambitions, and I had been thinking that when my name was cleared by a full revelation in the Queen Mary Mine case, and Idaho became a State, I might win renown in that arena."

"For this reason I was reluctant to leave Idaho, but I finally agreed and the Golden Brick was sold. Buckley paid me the money, and I started for Mr. Clifton's house. I had reached a cabin occupied by Mira Garrett when, as I was passing the door, she called to me and asked me to stop a moment, as she had a message to send to Stella. I went in and she delivered what I even then thought a rather senseless one."

"Then I went out and resumed my way; but I had gone but a short distance when four men leaped upon me, and preventing all outcry, rushed me into another cabin. A sponge which smelled of chloroform was pressed to my nostrils, and I lost consciousness."

"When I recovered I was in a cabin, the exact situation of which I had no means of knowing, but I have since learned that it was in the Beehive. To this place I had probably been taken at once. Days passed in captivity. I was not allowed to go outside the single room of the cabin devoted to my use. My captors were four rough men, the leader of whom was called 'Buck.'

"Last night there came a change. As I lay in my bed I heard voices in the outer room, and one of them I thought had an old, familiar ring. I crept to the door and listened. I heard it again; the speaker was my old acquaintance, Francis Nelson, the man I had loved as a brother; but judge of my surprise when I learned from their talk that it was he who had me kidnapped."

"He was telling the men that Horseshoe Hank and another man were riding toward the Beehive, and that, as they might find the cabin, I must be bound to prevent an outcry. They talked further, and it was agreed that Horseshoe Hank, being a dangerous man, should be decoyed to the place and killed. Do you wonder my blood chilled with horror? Nelson the man I had so loved, was proved the most desperate of villains."

"They carried out their plan; I was bound, and later, Buck found Hank and Dandelion Dan, and decoyed them to the cabin. But fate prevented their attempt at murder. You all know how the rain had been falling. Well, Nelson, who had been hovering outside, had just whistled to his allies to let him in when a flood of accumulated rain poured down the gulch. The cabin was afloat in a moment."

"Realizing my danger I struggled like a madman and burst my bonds. The interior of the cabin was filled with water, but I managed to break a window and escape. A log was floating past; I seized it and hung on. Soon I saw I had a fellow voyager. It was Nelson. We drifted on together until cast upon a cliff. Once there, we had a hand-to-hand conflict in which he, being the stronger since my confinement, overpowered me. He spared my life, but retained me as a prisoner."

"Afterward, he made a raft and we floated out of the Beehive, but he found a hole, or cave, in the rocks, and confined me there. I believed I should soon have perished had not Horseshoe Hank come to my aid, but, be that as it may, I accuse Francis Nelson of being my kidnapper, and the law will look to him for the twenty thousand dollars stolen from me."

The Man of Big Luck then proceeded to tell what had set him on the track. When floating down the canyon, on the cabin-top, it will be

remembered that he saw a man at one point standing on the cliff. He recognized him as Francis Nelson, which was surprising, since Nelson had agreed to stay at the Bend and watch over Lida.

When Dandelion Dan told about the man in the brown coat he had seen on a raft, Hank suddenly remembered that Nelson had worn a brown coat when he saw him on the cliff. Hank asked himself why Nelson had been at the Beehive. Instantly he remembered the 'sick man' of the cabin, and his suspicions assumed sufficient form so that he and Dan hastened back toward the Beehive.

With the ground in so soft a condition as it had been left by the rain, Dan had no trouble in finding trails wherever men had walked, and the expedition resulted in the finding of Ross Gilmore.

"I have a word to say on this subject," said Mira. "The man whom you know as Francis Nelson is, really, named Lewis Gordon. A little over a year ago I became acquainted with him, in Colorado. I was engaged to Hank Latham, who is here known as Horseshoe Hank, but Gordon bewitched me and I ran away with him. We came here, after being married, and my husband has lived by his wits as best he could. Finally, he formed the plan of abducting Ross Gilmore, when the latter had received the money from Buckley. I was to help and I did. I decoyed Gilmore into my cabin, so it could be proved he was there, and ever since I have lied for Mr. Francis Nelson uneasiness. I denied the truth and acknowledged falsehood boldly, according to the plan he formed. I made people believe it was Ross Gilmore with whom I fled from Colorado, and that Ross was my husband. It was all a lie. I never spoke to him until the night he was in my cabin. All this I did for my husband, and I would still be true to him but I learned he was making desperate love to Miss Clifton, and I came here to-day to reveal the truth just as he was urging her to elope!"

Francis Nelson, *alias* Lewis Gordon, laughed lightly.

"The jig is up!" he remarked. "I may as well cave. All that has been charged against me is true. My only virtue has been my love for Miss Clifton. For her sake I pretended to be a saint; I almost believe it would have made me one had I won her. But I am at the end. Take me away, somebody; prison is the place for me!"

"One moment!" interrupted Horseshoe Hank. "There is another story to tell. Amos Buckley wants his deed to the Golden Brick. This paper was stolen by Ruford, at the instigation of Clifton. The latter is a born plotter. He formed the scheme of having Ruford steal the deed, and then he thought when Gilmore appeared with the twenty thousand dollars he would wheedle him over, using his love for Stella as a lever, and they would cheat Buckley out of the Golden Brick."

"I don't believe Gilmore would have agreed to this, for he is a man of honor, but Nelson's stroke in the game spiked Clifton's guns. So many being in, it caused perplexity all around, and Clifton really believed Gilmore had run away. Gentlemen, some of you look in Ruford's pocket and find the deed. As for Clifton, he has attempted two or three murders, and the law wants him."

Ruford, badly hurt by Nelson's blow, offered no resistance, and the deed was found; but Clifton fought like a tiger, and was only overpowered after a hard struggle.

Stella fainted in Ross Gilmore's arms; and it was a sad scene, over which we may well draw the veil.

At the end of three months Locke Bassett, *alias* Ross Gilmore, found his reputation cleared, not only in the matter of the Golden Brick, but in that of the Beeswax Flat swindle. A confession by one of the real swindlers, on his deathbed, cleared the man they had made their dupe, and he could once more bear his real name and be honored of men. Faithful Lizzie, *alias* Lida Deane, was happy, and Mrs. Bassett had nearly recovered her reason.

Parker Clifton was imprisoned, but he was never tried. Wah Ho tried to rescue him, and both were shot dead by the guards.

That accomplished swindler, Lewis Gordon, *alias* Francis Nelson, was given a long term in prison, where he still is. At the last Mira changed her mind and would not testify against him, but her evidence was not needed. After the trial, she suddenly and completely disappeared.

"Buck" was never seen after the flood in the Beehive; probably he and his companions perished there. Cyclone Sam, too, disappeared after his shot at Abe Benson.

Amos Buckley held the Golden Brick and is running it to-day.

After the Bassett family was reunited, Horseshoe Hank became a frequent guest, and it came to pass that, one day, Lizzie became his wife, while on the same day Stella became Mrs. Locke Bassett.

In a prosperous Idaho mining-town a good business is being done by Bassett & Latham.

They are accumulating wealth, and no shadow of the old life troubles them. "Lida" and Stella are as pretty as ever, and they make true and loving wives. The latter has never regretted that she remained true to Ross Gilmore when the world pronounced him guilty.

They often think of brilliant, crafty Lewis Gordon, serving his time in prison, and Stella thanks Providence that she did not fall into his power.

Ruford went steadily to the bad, and is now said to be living a wretched life in Montana.

Goliath remains with his mistress and is as faithful as ever. He may often be seen abroad with the elder Mrs. Bassett, who still has some odd freaks at times.

Dandelion Dan returned to his old life as a hunter.

"It's ther only 'spectable life a man kin lead," he often says, "an' I never enjoyed myself out on't except when with Hoss-shoe Hank. He was a good 'un from ther ground up, an' when he said 'All hands around!' what he said went ez it laid. I war sorry ter part from him, but he says he's right happy, an' I reckon it war when he married that he proved in ther fullest sense that he war entitled ter be called the Man o' Big Luck!"

THE END.

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